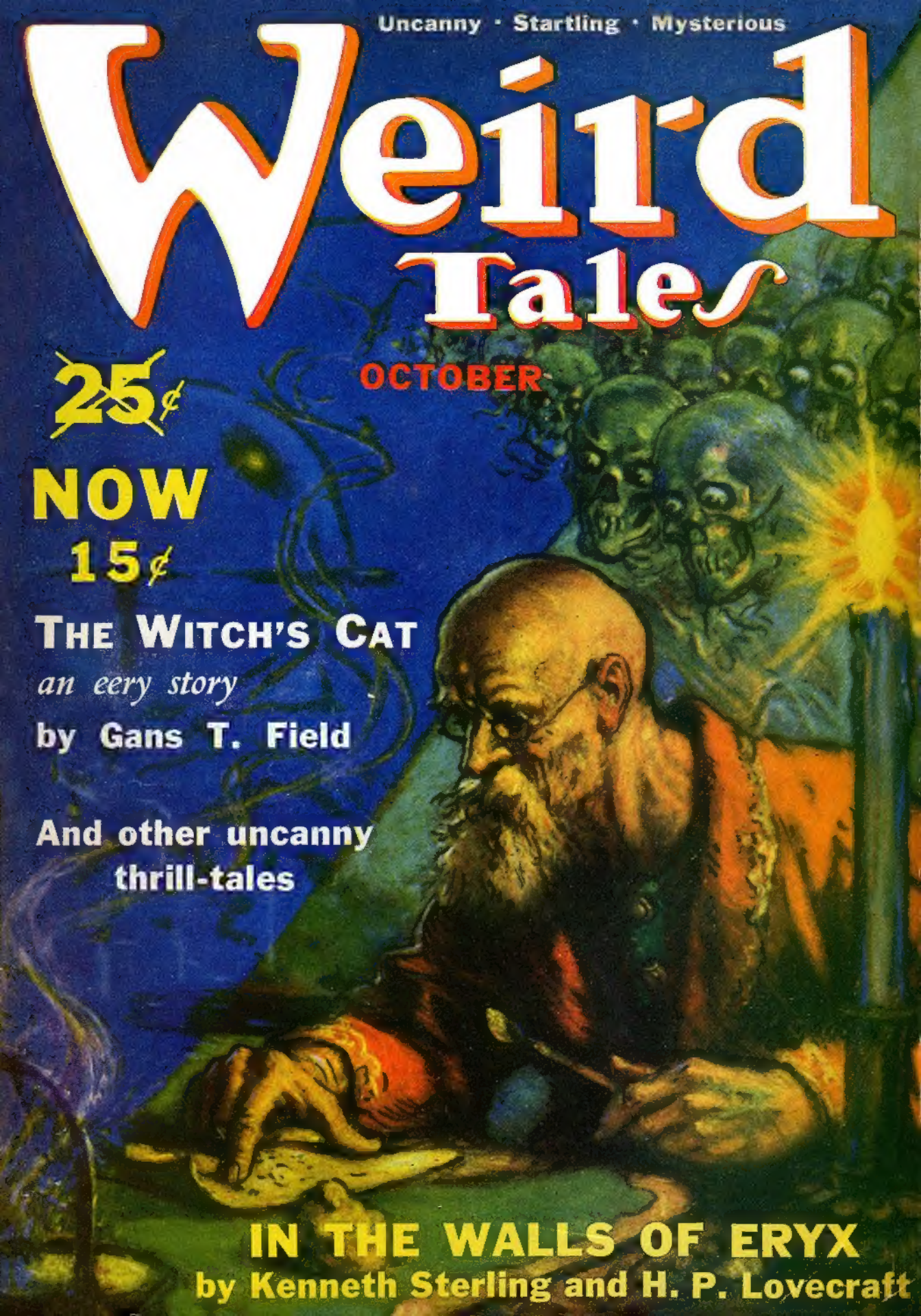
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A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

# Weird Tales

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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**WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH**

# Read what happened to these two men when I said:

# I will Train You at Home in Spare Time for a GOOD JOB IN RADIO

THESE TWO FELLOWS each clipped and sent me a coupon, like the one in this ad. Both were interested in getting a good job in Radio—a field with a future. They got my book on Radio's opportunities, found out how I trained men at home to be Radio Technicians. S. J. Ebert, 104-B Quadrangle, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, saw Radio offered him a real chance. He enrolled. The other fellow, whom we will call John Doe, wrote he wasn't interested. He was just one of those fellows who wants a better job, better pay, but never does anything about it.

Now, read what S. J. Ebert writes me and remember that John Doe had the same chance: "Upon graduation I accepted a job fixing Radio sets, and within three weeks was made Service Manager of a Radio store. This job paid me $40 to $50 a week compared with $18 I earned in a shoe factory. Eight months later I went with Station KWCR as operator. From there I went to KTNT. Now I am Radio Engineer with WSUI. I certainly recommend N.R.I. to all interested in the greatest field of all, Radio."

**"I WANT TO HELP YOU.**

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J. E. Smith.

Radio is a young, growing field with a future, offering many good pay spare time and full time job opportunities. And you don't have to give up your present job to become a Radio Technician. I train you right at home in your spare time.

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Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, police, aviation, Commercial Radio; loudspeaker systems, electronic devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N.R.I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open good jobs soon.

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**J. E. SMITH, President**
**Dept. 9KM, National Radio Institute**
**Washington, D. C.**

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J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9KM,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith:
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# Mystery of the Missing Magnate

By RALPH MILNE FARLEY

*A curious tale about a businessman who found himself in two cities at the same time*

"HOOEY!" was an inelegant word for the dignified Milwaukee financier, Eric Vogel, to use. But, in the first place, the movie which he was watching was certainly absurd enough to tax his patience and his credulity. In the second place, he was saying the word to himself, under his breath. And, in the third place, it was not likely that anyone in this little theater in Mobile, Alabama, knew him.

"Hooey!"

It had been a hard morning for Mr. Vogel, but at last he had put the big cotton deal across. The papers were all signed. The Southern magnates couldn't back out now.

Vogel had felt let down and exhausted. So after wiring the good news to partners in Milwaukee and snatching a brief lunch, he had gone to the nearest movie for an hour or so of amusement.

The signs on the outside of the theater, in addition to bank-nite and all that sort of rot, had advertised a "travelog," and Mr. Vogel liked travelogs. Quite dignified and educational they were, entirely different from silly cartoon comics and equally silly Westerns. So Mr. Vogel had paid his quarter, and had entered and taken his seat.

But he had not been prepared for this sort of a travelog at all! Scenes of India. Hindoo fakirs performing the outmoded and discredited mango trick, and rope trick, and swords-through-the-basket trick.

"Hooey!" snorted Mr. Vogel. "Every intelligent person knows that no one has ever seen one of these tricks performed. It's always that someone knows a man who knows a man who has seen it. The information is never first-hand."

Yet here were actual motion-photographs of the tricks. The lecturer and the cameraman must then have been eye-witnesses. Mr. Vogel watched, fascinated, and his muttered hooeys did not sound very convincing, or even convinced.

The swami on the screen then produced a crystal globe on a short black pedestal. One of his helpers stared at the globe as the swami made passes over it. The man disappeared. Further passes by the swami, and the man rematerialized.

Hooey! Trick photography, probably. And yet—perhaps——

The shining globe, with the black-bearded beturbaned face of the Hindoo leering at the audience across the top of it, and his skinny talons making mystic passes over it, now grew and grew until the globe occupied the whole foreground. Then the words "THE END" flashed upon its rounded surface, and the educational film was over.

The next film—worse luck—was a Western. Mr. Vogel got heavily to his feet and left the theater, turning over in his common-sense business-like mind the marvels which he had just seen portrayed,

"There swam in front of his eyes a grinning sinister visage of a Hindoo fakir."

wondering if by any chance they had really occurred as photographed, instead of being merely faked.

HOOEY! The very idea of such thoughts! Especially the part about the dematerialization and rematerialization of the young man who had stared into the crystal ball as the swami made passes over it. Hooey!

Mr. Vogel stared up and down the familiar street.

"Yes, this is Milwaukee, all right. I wonder how I happened to go to the movies this afternoon. Let me think. What day is this?"

He glanced at a paper on a newsstand.

"June 19. Uh!" Some thought, dimly connected with that date, struggled for recognition. "Good grief! I ought to be in Mobile to-day, putting across that cotton deal! It just *can't* be the nineteenth!"

With slow ponderous dignity he bought a paper, and verified the date. Yes, it was the nineteenth all right. But, if so, then why hadn't he gone to Mobile?

His jaw dropped, and he rubbed his bewildered eyes. Then noticing a cop star-

ing intently at him, he shook himself together, and with some pretense at his habitual dignity, hurried off up the avenue.

Entering the Schroeder, he sat down heavily in the lobby, took his head in his hands, and tried to piece things together.

He was almost sure that he had gone to Mobile. Certainly he had! This conviction was reinforced by his recollection of some of the minor events of the trip: the mix-up over his reservations at Chicago; the hot night in the sleeper, and the man who had snored so; the undignified red auto, like a fire-chief's, in which his Southern representative had met him at the Mobile station; the tiring all-morning conference in his room in the Hotel Bienville; and his final triumph and the signing of the papers.

Could it be that his advance worries about the cotton deal which meant so much to his firm, had so preyed upon his mind that he had merely dreamed all this? Incredible! And yet here he was in Milwaukee, on the very day on which he ought to be negotiating that cotton deal down in Mobile!

He dared not return to his office, lest his partners question him as to why he was still in town. Yet it was absolutely essential that he go to the office, to find out what had happened when he failed to show up at the conference. His Southern representative Henderson must be frantic!

"I could swear I was in Mobile this morning," he moaned. "Where on earth *have* I been these last two days? Am I losing my mind? That cotton deal! That cotton deal! I mustn't let it fall through."

Absent-mindedly he pulled out his big gold watch and looked at it. Five minutes past one. For some subconscious reason, the hour reassured him. Getting up, he squared his broad shoulders, and set his firm jaw determinedly.

"Maybe I *have* lost my mind, but I haven't yet lost my punch," he stoutly asserted.

So with springy step he strode out of the hotel and over to the building which housed his office. Avoiding the elevator, lest the elevator-boy see him, he puffed up the four flights of stairs.

THE door of The Vogel Company was closed and locked. Of course. Everyone was out to lunch. Now he knew why his glance at his watch had given him the courage to come over here.

He fumbled in his pocket for his keys. Then he remembered that he had left them on the top of the dresser in his room in the Hotel Bienville at Mobile that morning.

A telegram had been shoved under the office door, and one yellow corner still projected. Stooping ponderously, Mr. Vogel inched it out, straightened up again, and ran his finger under the flap of the envelope. It came open without tearing, for the stickum was still damp. The wire read:

AUAB 51 10
MOBILE ALA JUN 19 1135A

THE VOGEL CO
TOWER BLDG MILW

DEAL SATISFACTORILY COMPLETED AFTER VICIOUS ALL MORNING CONFERENCE CONGRATULATE ME

VOGEL
1259P JUN 19

The very wire which he himself remembered having sent an hour and a half ago from Mobile! But of course the deal couldn't possibly have been completed, for he couldn't have been in Mobile that morning and back here in Milwaukee that afternoon.

There swam in front of Mr. Vogel's eyes the grinning sinister visage of a Hindoo fakir, making passes with taloned fingers above a crystal globe.

Shaking himself together, Mr. Vogel

trudged down four flights to the ground floor again, solacing himself with the thought that at least he had waylaid that absurdly impossible telegram before his partners received it. Hurrying out of the building and into an adjoining one, lest one of his partners see and question him, he entered a phone booth and dialed Western Union.

"Take a wire to John Henderson, Merchants Bank Building, Mobile, Alabama. Eric Vogel."

Hold everything Period. Just find by some error my yesterday's wire announcing my delayed departure not sent Period. Leaving tonight arriving Thursday Period. Hold everything until my arrival Period.

Vogel.

"Night letter, sir?" asked the voice.

"No. Straight telegram. And rush it!"

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir. And do you want to leave in both 'Hold everythings'?"

"Make it three of them, if necessary," Mr. Vogel snapped. "Hurry!" He swayed against the inside of the booth.

"Shall I charge it to your firm, Mr. Vogel?"

"Yes, of course— No, no! Send it collect." It would never do for his partners to find out about this wire.

And then he realized that, instead of putting that other wire into his pocket as he had intended, he had absent-mindedly stuffed it under the office door again. He could go back up there and get it. But no! Someone might have come in from lunch by now. The thing for him to do was to return to Mobile at once.

Return? What did he mean, return? How could he return to a place where he hadn't yet been?

MR. VOGEL staggered out into the street. It was still early afternoon. Plenty of time to go home and pack. So he took a taxi to his apartment house.

No one answered his ring. That was all right, for now he remembered that his wife had gone to visit friends in the country. He had put her aboard her train himself, just before taking his own train to Chicago, en route for Mobile, two days ago. But no. That couldn't be right, for he hadn't gone to Mobile at all. He must keep that thought constantly before him, or he would go mad. And it would be most undignified for a Vogel to go mad. "I—haven't—been—to—Mobile!"

He felt in his pocket for his keys, then remembered that he had left his key-ring that morning on the dresser in his room in the Bienville Hotel at Mobile. But what foolishness was this? He hadn't been to Mobile. He must keep constantly in mind the fact that he hadn't been to Mobile. Most probably his keys were on top of the dresser in his room in his Milwaukee apartment. Yes, that was it. That *must* be it. Keys on dresser in Milwaukee, not Mobile.

Somewhat brightening, he rang for the janitor. But the janitor did not answer, nor was he to be found anywhere about the building. With a shrug of resignation, Vogel took a bus downtown, bought a few necessaries at Gimbels, and boarded the first train for Chicago.

After making his reservations for Mobile, he found that he still had an hour or so to spare before train-time. The movies at once suggested themselves. As he taxied across town to the Dearborn Street Station, he had noticed a theater quite near the station, advertising a travelog. And he doted on travelogs. So he stepped out of the station and walked back a couple of blocks to the theater.

As he took his seat, and glanced up at the screen, there leered down at him the black-bearded beturbaned face of a Hindoo swami, over the top of a gradually enlarging crystal globe. The fakir was making passes with his dark skinny hands,

as his piercing black eyes caught and held the gaze of Mr. Vogel.

Where had Mr. Vogel seen that face before?

Dizzy and bemused, he stared back at it. The crystal globe swelled and neared, until it filled the whole screen. The words "THE END" appeared on it. The educational film was over.

The next film was a Western. Mr. Vogel detested Westerns. So he got heavily to his feet and left the theater, turning over in his common-sense mind the marvels of Hindoo magic, which he dimly remembered having seen portrayed, wondering if by any chance they had really occurred as photographed, instead of being merely faked.

Hooey! The very idea of such thoughts! Especially the part about the dematerialization and rematerialization of the young man who had stared into the crystal ball as the swami made passes over it. Hooey!

Let's see—where was he? Oh, yes, Chicago, two blocks from the Dearborn Station, killing time while waiting for the train for Mobile.

He pulled out his large gold watch and looked at it. Four minutes after five. His train didn't leave until six. Well, he could sit in the station and read a newspaper until train time.

He looked up and down the street, but couldn't quite figure which way to go. His sense of direction had become turned around while he was in the movie. No taxies were in sight. Finally he spotted a Negro policeman and inquired the way to the station.

"Which station, suh?" the cop asked.

"The Dearborn Street Station C. and E. I.," Mr. Vogel replied.

"I reckon yo' got me wrong, boss," said the cop, scratching his head. "The on'y two stations hiah ah de L. an' Ain, and de So'thun."

"What!" Mr. Vogel exclaimed. Then, catching sight of a familiar park ahead, "What square is this?"

"Bienville Square, suh."

SHAKING his head in bewilderment, Mr. Vogel threaded his way brokenly across the brightly lighted square to his hotel. On the steps he found the frantic manager of his Mobile office, John Henderson.

"Ah, there you are, sir!" Henderson exclaimed. "Where have you been all afternoon and evening, sir?"

"Movies," Mr. Vogel replied succinctly, then shuddered at the word.

Henderson raised his eyebrows slightly at such plebeian tastes in his employer. "Well, it must have been a pretty interesting show to keep you so long, sir. How many times did you see it, if I may ask?"

"At least twice," Mr. Vogel stated grimly. He was gradually getting back his grip on himself. "What's all the excitement?"

"Look at this wire that came in this afternoon from Milwaukee while you were at the theater."

Mr. Vogel took it, and read:

AUB 101 28 COLLECT
MILWAUKEE WIS JUN 19 123P

JOHN HENDERSON
MERCHANTS BANK BLDG MOBILE ALA

HOLD EVERYTHING. JUST FIND BY SOME ERROR MY YESTERDAYS WIRE ANNOUNCING MY DELAYED DEPARTURE NOT SENT. LEAVING TONIGHT ARRIVING THURSDAY. HOLD EVERYTHING UNTIL MY ARRIVAL. HOLD EVERYTHING.

ERIC VOGEL.
201P JUN 19.

Mr. Vogel smiled grimly at that third "Hold everything." Then he tore the telegram into little bits, and shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Somebody is probably trying to play a practical joke on us," he said. With ap-

parent irrelevance, he added, "Henderson, do you ever get so absorbed in a motion picture that you completely lose track of where you are? Even what city you are in, I mean."

"I don't think so, sir," Henderson replied, a look of puzzled uncomprehension on his matter-of-fact face. "I rarely go to the cinema, sir."

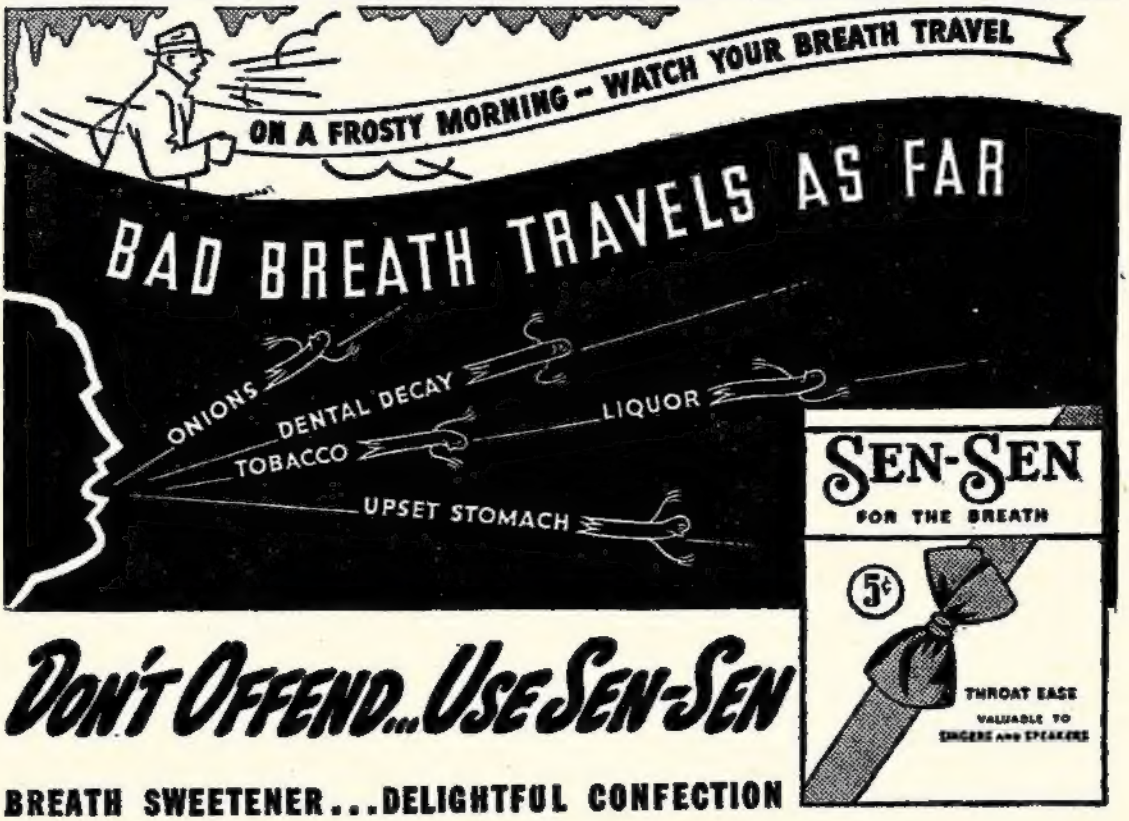
Mr. Vogel narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, pursed up his lips, and shook his head introspectively. "Well, Henderson, I'm sorry to have kept you waiting around all afternoon for me. Run along home now. I'll see you at the office tomorrow early, to arrange for shipping the cotton."

Then as he entered the hotel, he ruminated, "Of course, it could all have been my imagination. No one whom I know saw me in Milwaukee. The telegram I sent from Mobile is still under the door of my Milwaukee office—I mean, my partners have gotten it by now. The other wire, the one I sent—I mean, the one I *thought* I sent from Milwaukee—I *could* have phoned it clear from here to the Western Union in Milwaukee. Or it could have been a practical joke. So I guess none of this happened after all."

He sighed with relief, and smiled at his own credulity. "Hooey!" The word vividly recalled to his memory the leering face of the Hindoo swami, staring out from the streen, across the magic gazing globe. Mr. Vogel shuddered. He reached into his breast pocket, took out his billfold, opened it, and peered within.

Yes, as he feared, there lay the railroad ticket and the Pullman reservation, from Chicago to Mobile, purchased by him that very afternoon at the Dearborn Street Station in Chicago!

So his weird adventure must have happened, after all.



# The Witch's Cat

By GANS T. FIELD

*An odd and curious tale of witchcraft, and a skinny black cat that lived in the old woman's house in the hollow*

OLD JAEL BETTISS, who lived in the hollow among the cypresses, was not a real witch.

It makes no difference that folk thought she was, and walked fearfully wide of her shadow. Nothing can be proved by the fact that she was as disgustingly ugly without as she was wicked within. It is quite irrelevant that evil was her study and profession and pleasure. She was no witch; she only pretended to be.

Jael Bettiss knew that all laws providing for the punishment of witches had been repealed, or at the least forgotten. As to being feared and hated, that was meat and drink to Jael Bettiss, living secretly alone in the hollow.

The house and the hollow belonged to a kindly old villager, who had been elected marshal and was too busy to look after his property. Because he was easy-going and perhaps a little daunted, he let Jael Bettiss live there rent-free. The house was no longer snug; the back of its roof was broken in, the eaves drooped slackly. At some time or other the place had been painted brown, before that with ivory black. Now both coats of color peeled away in huge flakes, making the clapboards seem scrofulous. The windows had been broken in every small, grubby pane, and mended with coarse brown paper, so that they were like cast and blurred eyes. Behind was the muddy, bramble-choked back yard, and behind that yawned the old quarry, now abandoned and full of black water. As for the inside—but few ever saw it.

Jael Bettiss did not like people to come into her house. She always met callers on the old cracked doorstep, draped in a cloak of shadowy black, with gray hair straggling, her nose as hooked and sharp as the beak of a buzzard, her eyes filmy and sore-looking, her wrinkle-bordered mouth always grinning and showing her yellow, chisel-shaped teeth.

The near-by village was an old-fashioned place, with stone flags instead of concrete for pavements, and the villagers were the simplest of men and women. From them Jael Bettiss made a fair living, by selling love philtres, or herbs to cure sickness, or charms to ward off bad luck. When she wanted extra money, she would wrap her old black cloak about her and, tramping along a country road, would stop at a cow-pen and ask the farmer what he would do if his cows went dry. The farmer, worried, usually came at dawn next day to her hollow and bought a good-luck charm. Occasionally the cows would go dry anyway, by accident of nature, and their owner would pay more and more, until their milk returned to them.

Now and then, when Jael Bettiss came to the door, there came with her the gaunt black cat, Gib.

Gib was not truly black, any more than Jael Bettiss was truly a witch. He had been born with white markings at muzzle, chest and forepaws, so that he looked to be in

"You're the only witness, and I don't want any trace of you around."

full evening dress. Left alone, he would have grown fat and fluffy. But Jael Bettiss, who wanted a fearsome pet, kept all his white spots smeared with thick soot, and underfed him to make him look rakish and lean.

On the night of the full moon, she would drive poor Gib from her door. He would wander to the village in search of food, and would wail mournfully in the yards. Awakened householders would angrily throw boots or pans or sticks of kindling. Often Gib was hit, and his cries were sharpened by pain. When that happened, Jael Bettiss took care to be seen next morning with a bandage on head or wrist. Some of the simplest villagers thought that Gib was really the old woman, magically transformed. Her reputation grew, as did Gib's unpopularity. But Gib did not deserve mistrust—like all cats, he was a practical philosopher, who wanted to be comfortable and quiet and dignified. At bottom, he was amiable. Like all cats, too, he loved his home above all else; and the house in the hollow, be it ever so humble and often cruel, was home. It was unthinkable to him that he might live elsewhere.

In the village he had two friends—black-eyed John Frey, the storekeeper's son, who brought the mail to and from the county seat, and Ivy Hill, pretty blond daughter of the town marshal, the same town marshal who owned the hollow and let Jael Bettiss live in the old house. John Frey and Ivy Hill were so much in love with each other that they loved everything else, even black-stained, hungry Gib. He was grateful; if he had been able, he would have loved them in return. But his little heart had room for one devotion only, and that was given to the house in the hollow.

ONE day, Jael Bettiss slouched darkly into old Mr. Frey's store, and up to the counter that served for postoffice. Leering, she gave John Frey a letter. It was directed to a certain little-known publisher, asking for a certain little-known book. Several days later, she appeared again, received a parcel, and bore it to her home.

In her gloomy, secret parlor, she unwrapped her purchase. It was a small, drab volume, with no title on cover or back. Sitting at the rickety table, she began to read. All evening and most of the night she read, forgetting to give Gib his supper, though he sat hungrily at her feet.

At length, an hour before dawn, she finished. Laughing loudly and briefly, she turned her beak-nose toward the kerosene lamp on the table. From the book she read aloud two words. The lamp went out, though she had not blown at it. Jael Bettiss spoke one commanding word more, and the lamp flamed alight again.

"At last!" she cried out in shrill exultation, and grinned down at Gib. Her lips drew back from her yellow chisels of teeth. "At last!" she crowed again. "Why don't you speak to me, you little brute? . . . Why don't you, indeed?"

She asked that final question as though she had been suddenly inspired. Quickly she glanced through the back part of the book, howled with laughter over something she found there, then sprang up and scuttled like a big, filthy crab into the dark, windowless cell that was her kitchen. There she mingled salt and malt in the palm of her skinny right hand. After that, she rummaged out a bundle of dried herbs, chewed them fine and spat them into the mixture. Stirring again with her forefinger, she returned to the parlor. Scanning the book to refresh her memory, she muttered a nasty little rime. Finally she dashed the mess suddenly upon Gib.

He retreated, shaking himself, outraged and startled. In a corner he sat down, and bent his head to lick the smeared fragments of the mixture away. But they revolted his tongue and palate, and he paused

in the midst of this chore, so important to cats; and meanwhile Jael Bettiss yelled, "Speak!"

Gib crouched and blinked, feeling sick. His tongue came out and steadied his lips. Finally he said: "I want something to eat."

His voice was small and high, like a little child's, but entirely understandable. Jael Bettiss was so delighted that she laughed and clapped her bony knees with her hands, in self-applause.

"It worked!" she cried. "No more humbug about me, you understand? I'm a real witch at last, and not a fraud!"

Gib found himself able to understand all this, more clearly than he had ever understood human affairs before. "I want something to eat," he said again, more definitely than before. "I didn't have any supper, and it's nearly——"

"Oh, stow your gab!" snapped his mistress. "This book, crammed with knowledge and strength, that made me able to do it. I'll never be without it again, and it'll teach me all the things I've only guessed at and mumbled about. I'm a real witch now, I say. And if you don't think I'll make those ignorant sheep of villagers realize it——"

Once more she went off into gales of wild, cracked mirth, and threw a dish at Gib. He darted away into a corner just in time, and the missile crashed into blue-and-white china fragments against the wall. But Jael Bettiss read aloud from her book an impressive gibberish, and the dish reformed itself on the floor; the bits crept together and joined and the cracks disappeared, as trickling drops of water form into a pool. And finally, when the witch's twig-like forefinger beckoned, the dish floated upward like a leaf in a breeze and set itself gently back on the table. Gib watched warily.

"That's small to what I shall do hereafter," swore Jael Bettiss.

WHEN next the mail was distributed at the general store, a dazzling stranger appeared.

She wore a cloak, an old-fashioned black coat, but its drapery did not conceal the tall perfection of her form. As for her face, it would have stirred interest and admiration in larger and more sophisticated gatherings than the knot of letter-seeking villagers. Its beauty was scornful but inviting, classic but warm, with something in it of Grecian sculpture and Oriental allure. If the nose was cruel, it was straight; if the lips were sullen, they were full; if the forehead was a suspicion low, it was white and smooth. Thick, thunder-black hair swept up from that forehead, and backward to a knot at the neck. The eyes glowed with strange, hot lights, and wherever they turned they pierced and captivated.

People moved away to let her have a clear, sweeping pathway forward to the counter. Until this stranger had entered, Ivy Hill was the loveliest person present; now she looked only modest and fresh and blond in her starched gingham, and worried to boot. As a matter of fact, Ivy Hill's insides felt cold and topsy-turvy, because she saw how fascinated was the sudden attention of John Frey.

"Is there," asked the newcomer in a deep, creamy voice, "any mail for me?"

"Wh-what name, ma'am?" asked John Frey, his brown young cheeks turning full crimson.

"Bettiss. Jael Bettiss."

He began to fumble through the sheaf of envelopes, with hands that shook. "Are you," he asked, "any relation to the old lady of that name, the one who lives in the hollow?"

"Yes, of a sort." She smiled a slow, conquering smile. "She's my—aunt. Yes. Perhaps you see the family resemblance?" Wider and wider grew the smile with which she assaulted John Frey. "If there

isn't any mail," she went on, "I would like a stamp. A one-cent stamp."

Turning to his little metal box on the shelf behind, John Frey tore a single green stamp from the sheet. His hand shook still more as he gave it to the customer and received in exchange a copper cent.

There was really nothing exceptional about the appearance of that copper cent. It looked brown and a little worn, with Lincoln's head on it, and a date—1917. But John Frey felt a sudden glow in the hand that took it, a glow that shot along his arm and into his heart. He gazed at the coin as if he had never seen its like before. And he put it slowly into his pocket, a different pocket from the one in which he usually kept change, and placed another coin in the till to pay for the stamp. Poor Ivy Hill's blue eyes grew round and downright miserable. Plainly he meant to keep that copper piece as a souvenir. But John Frey gazed only at the stranger, raptly, as though he were suddenly stunned or hypnotized.

The dark, sullen beauty drew her cloak more tightly around her, and moved regally out of the store and away toward the edge of town.

As she turned up the brush-hidden trail to the hollow, a change came. Not that her step was less young and free, her figure less queenly, her eyes dimmer or her beauty short of perfect. All these were as they had been; but her expression became set and grim, her body tense and her head high and truculent. It was as though, beneath that young loveliness, lurked an old and evil heart—which was precisely what did lurk there, it does not boot to conceal. But none saw except Gib, the black cat with soot-covered white spots, who sat on the doorstep of the ugly cottage. Jael Bettiss thrust him aside with her foot and entered.

In the kitchen she filled a tin basin from a wooden bucket, and threw into the water a pinch of coarse green powder with an unpleasant smell. As she stirred it in with her hands, they seemed to grow skinny and harsh. Then she threw great palmfuls of the liquid into her face and over her head, and other changes came. . . .

The woman who returned to the front door, where Gib watched with a cat's apprehensive interest, was hideous old Jael Bettiss, whom all the village knew and avoided.

"He's trapped," she shrilled triumphantly. "That penny, the one I soaked for three hours in a love-philtre, trapped him the moment he touched it!" She stumped to the table, and patted the book as though it were a living, lovable thing.

"You taught me," she crooned to it. "You're winning me the love of John Frey!" She paused, and her voice grew harsh again. "Why not? I'm old and ugly and queer, but I can love, and John Frey is the handsomest man in the village!"

THE next day she went to the store again, in her new and dazzling person as a dark, beautiful girl. Gib, left alone in the hollow, turned over in his mind the things that he had heard. The new gift of human speech had brought with it, of necessity, a human quality of reasoning; but his viewpoint and his logic were as strongly feline as ever.

Jael Bettiss' dark love that lured John Frey promised no good to Gib. There would be plenty of trouble, he was inclined to think, and trouble was something that all sensible cats avoided. He was wise now, but he was weak. What could he do against danger? And his desires, as they had been since kittenhood, were food and warmth and a cozy sleeping-place, and a little respectful affection. Just now he was getting none of the four.

He thought also of Ivy Hill. She liked Gib, and often had shown it. If she won

John Frey despite the witch's plan, the two would build a house all full of creature comforts—cushions, open fires, probably fish and chopped liver. Gib's tongue caressed his soot-stained lips at the savory thought. It would be good to have a home with Ivy Hill and John Frey, if once he was quit of Jael Bettiss. . . .

But he put the thought from him. The witch had never held his love and loyalty. That went to the house in the hollow, his home since the month that he was born. Even magic had not taught him how to be rid of that cat-instinctive obsession for his own proper dwelling-place. The sinister, strife-sodden hovel would always call and claim him, would draw him back from the warmest fire, the softest bed, the most savory food in the world. Only John Howard Payne could have appreciated Gib's yearnings to the full, and he died long ago, in exile from the home he loved.

When Jael Bettiss returned, she was in a fine trembling rage. Her real self shone through the glamor of her disguise, like murky fire through a thin porcelain screen.

Gib was on the doorstep again, and tried to dodge away as she came up, but her enchantments, or something else, had made Jael Bettiss too quick even for a cat. She darted out a hand and caught him by the scruff of the neck.

"Listen to me," she said, in a voice as deadly as the trickle of poisoned water. "You understand human words. You can talk, and you can hear what I say. You can do what I say, too." She shook him, by way of emphasis. "Can't you do what I say?"

"Yes," said Gib weakly, convulsed with fear.

"All right, I have a job for you. And mind you do it well, or else——" She broke off and shook him again, letting him imagine what would happen if he disobeyed.

"Yes," said Gib again, panting for breath in her tight grip. "What's it about?"

"It's about that little fool, Ivy Hill. She's not quite out of his heart. . . . Go to the village tonight," ordered Jael Bettiss, "and to the house of the marshal. Steal something that belongs to Ivy Hill."

"Steal something?"

"Don't echo me, as if you were a silly parrot." She let go of him, and hurried back to the book that was her constant study. "Bring me something that Ivy Hill owns and touches—and be back here with it before dawn."

Gib carried out her orders. Shortly after sundown he crept through the deepened dusk to the home of Marshal Hill. Doubly black with the soot habitually smeared upon him by Jael Bettiss, he would have been almost invisible, even had anyone been on guard against his coming. But nobody watched; the genial old man sat on the front steps, talking to his daughter.

"Say," the father teased, "isn't young Johnny Frey coming over here tonight, as usual?"

"I don't know, daddy," said Ivy Hill wretchedly.

"What's that daughter?" The marshal sounded surprised. "Is there anything gone wrong between you two young 'uns?"

"Perhaps not, but—oh, daddy, there's a new girl come to town——"

And Ivy Hill burst into tears, groping dolefully on the step beside her for her little wadded handkerchief. But she could not find it.

For Gib, stealing near, had caught it up in his mouth and was scampering away toward the edge of town, and beyond to the house in the hollow.

MEANWHILE, Jael Bettiss worked hard at a certain project of wax-modeling. Any witch, or student of witchcraft, would have known at once why she did this.

After several tries, she achieved some-

thing quite interesting and even clever—a little female figure, that actually resembled Ivy Hill.

Jael Bettiss used the wax of three candles to give it enough substance and proportion. To make is more realistic, she got some fresh, pale-gold hemp, and of this made hair, like the wig of a blond doll, for the wax head. Drops of blue ink served for eyes, and a blob of berry-juice for the red mouth. All the while she worked, Jael Bettiss was muttering and mumbling words and phrases she had gleaned from the rearward pages of her book.

When Gib brought in the handkerchief, Jael Bettiss snatched it from his mouth, with a grunt by way of thanks. With rusty scissors and coarse white thread, she fashioned for the wax figure a little dress. It happened that the handkerchief was of gingham, and so the garment made all the more striking the puppet's resemblance to Ivy Hill.

"You're a fine one!" tittered the witch, propping her finished figure against the lamp. "You'd better be scared!"

For it happened that she had worked into the waxen face an expression of terror. The blue ink of the eyes made wide round blotches, a stare of agonized fear; and the berry-juice mouth seemed to tremble, to plead shakily for mercy.

Again Jael Bettiss refreshed her memory of goetic spells by poring over the back of the book, and after that she dug from the bottom of an old pasteboard box a handful of rusty pins. She chuckled over them, so that one would think triumph already hers. Laying the puppet on its back, so that the lamplight fell full upon it, she began to recite a spell.

"I have made my wish before," she said in measured tones. "I will make it now. And there was never a day that I did not see my wish fulfilled." Simple, vague—but how many have died because those words were spoken in a certain way over images of them?

The witch thrust a pin into the breast of the little wax figure, and drove it all the way in, with a murderous pressure of her thumb. Another pin she pushed into the head, another into an arm, another into a leg; and so on, until the gingham-clad puppet was fairly studded with transfixing pins.

"Now," she said, "we shall see what we shall see."

Morning dawned, as clear and golden as though wickedness had never been born into the world. The mysterious new paragon of beauty—not a young man of the village but mooned over her, even though she was the reputed niece and namesake of that unsavory old vagabond, Jael Bettiss—walked into the general store to make purchases. One delicate pink ear turned to the gossip of the housewives.

Wasn't it awful, they were agreeing, how poor little Ivy Hill was suddenly sick almost to death—she didn't seem to know her father or her friends. Not even Doctor Melcher could find out what was the matter with her. Strange that John Frey was not interested in her troubles; but John Frey sat behind the counter, slumped on his stool like a mud idol, and his eyes lighted up only when they spied lovely young Jael Bettiss with her market basket.

When she had heard enough, the witch left the store and went straight to the town marshal's house. There she spoke gravely and sorrowfully about how she feared for the sick girl, and was allowed to visit Ivy Hill in her bedroom. To the father and the doctor, it seemed that the patient grew stronger and felt less pain while Jael Bettiss remained to wish her a quick recovery; but, not long after this new acquaintance departed, Ivy Hill grew worse. She fainted, and recovered only to vomit.

And she vomited—pins, rusty pins. Something like that happened in old Salem Village, and earlier still in Scotland, before

the grisly cult of North Berwick was literally burned out. But Doctor Melcher, a more modern scholar, had never seen or heard of anything remotely resembling Ivy Hill's disorder.

So it went, for three full days. Gib, too, heard the doleful gossip as he slunk around the village to hunt for food and to avoid Jael Bettiss, who did not like him near when she did magic. Ivy Hill was dying, and he mourned her, as for the boons of fish and fire and cushions and petting that might have been his. He knew, too, that he was responsible for her doom and his loss—that handkerchief that he had stolen had helped Jael Bettiss to direct her spells.

But philosophy came again to his aid. If Ivy Hill died, she died. Anyway, he had never been given the chance to live as her pensioner and pet. He was not even sure that he would have taken the chance—thinking of it, he felt strong, accustomed clamps upon his heart. The house in the hollow was his home forever. Elsewhere he'd be an exile.

Nothing would ever root it out of his feline soul.

ON THE evening of the third day, witch and cat faced each other across the table-top in the old house in the hollow.

"They've talked loud enough to make his dull ears hear," grumbled the fearful old woman—with none but Gib to see her, she had washed away the disguising enchantment that, though so full of lure, seemed to be a burden upon her. "John Frey has agreed to take Ivy Hill out in his automobile. The doctor thinks that the fresh air, and John Frey's company, will make her feel better—but it won't. It's too late. She'll never return from that drive."

She took up the pin-pierced wax image of her rival, rose and started toward the kitchen.

"What are you going to do?" Gib forced himself to ask.

"Do?" repeated Jael Bettiss, smiling murderously. "I'm going to put an end to that baby-faced chit—but why are you so curious? Get out, with your prying!"

And, snarling curses and striking with her claw-like hands, she made him spring down from his chair and run out of the house. The door slammed, and he crouched in some brambles and watched. No sound, and at the half-blinded windows no movement; but, after a time, smoke began to coil upward from the chimney. Its first puffs were dark and greasy-looking. Then it turned dull gray, then white, then blue as indigo. Finally it vanished altogether.

When Jael Bettiss opened the door and came out, she was once more in the semblance of a beautiful dark girl. Yet Gib recognized a greater terror about her than ever before.

"You be gone from here when I get back," she said to him.

"Gone?" stammered Gib, his little heart turning cold. "What do you mean?"

She stooped above him, like a threatening bird of prey.

"You be gone," she repeated. "If I ever see you again, I'll kill you—or I'll make my new husband kill you."

He still could not believe her. He shrank back, and his eyes turned mournfully to the old house that was the only thing he loved.

"You're the only witness to the things I've done," Jael Bettiss continued. "Nobody would believe their ears if a cat started telling tales, but anyway, I don't want any trace of you around. If you leave, they'll forget that I used to be a witch. So run!"

She turned away. Her mutterings were now only her thoughts aloud:

"If my magic works—and it always works—that car will find itself idling

around through the hill road to the other side of the quarry. John Frey will stop there. And so will Ivy Hill—forever."

Drawing her cloak around her, she stalked purposefully toward the old quarry behind the house.

LEFT by himself, Gib lowered his lids and let his yellow eyes grow dim and deep with thought. His shrewd beast's mind pawed and probed at this final wonder and danger that faced him and John Frey and Ivy Hill.

He must run away if he would live. The witch's house in the hollow, that had never welcomed him, now threatened him. No more basking on the doorstep, no more ambushing wood-mice among the brambles, no more dozing by the kitchen fire. Nothing for Gib henceforth but strange, forbidding wilderness, and scavenger's food, and no shelter, not on the coldest night. The village? But his only two friends, John Frey and Ivy Hill, were being taken from him by the magic of Jael Bettiss and her book. . . .

That book had done this. That book must undo it. There was no time to lose.

The door was not quite latched, and he nosed it open, despite the groans of its hinges. Hurrying in, he sprang up on the table.

It was gloomy in that tree-invested house, even for Gib's sharp eyes. Therefore, in a trembling fear almost too big for his little body, he spoke a word that Jael Bettiss had spoken, on her first night of power. As had happened then, so it happened now; the dark lamp glowed alight.

Gib pawed at the closed book, and contrived to lift its cover. Pressing it open with one front foot, with the other he painstakingly turned leaves, more leaves, and more yet. Finally he came to the page he wanted.

Not that he could read; and, in any case, the characters were strange in their shapes and combinations. Yet, if one looked long enough and levelly enough—even though one were a cat, and afraid—they made sense, conveyed intelligence.

And so into the mind of Gib, beating down his fears, there stole a phrase:

*Beware of mirrors. . . .*

So that was why Jael Bettiss never kept a mirror—not even now, when she could assume such dazzling beauty.

*Beware of mirrors,* the book said to Gib, *for they declare the truth, and truth is fatal to sorcery. Beware, also, of crosses, which defeat all spells. . . .*

That was definite inspiration. He moved back from the book, and let it snap shut. Then, pushing with head and paws, he coaxed it to the edge of the table and let it fall. Jumping down after it, he caught a corner of the book in his teeth and dragged it to the door, more like a retriever than a cat. When he got it into the yard, into a place where the earth was soft, he dug furiously until he had made a hole big enough to contain the volume. Then, thrusting it in, he covered it up.

Nor was that all his effort, so far as the book was concerned. He trotted a little way off to where lay some dry, tough twigs under the cypress trees. To the little grave he bore first one, then another of these, and laid them across each other, in the form of an X. He pressed them well into the earth, so that they would be hard to disturb. Perhaps he would keep an eye on that spot henceforth, after he had done the rest of the things in his mind, to see that the cross remained. And, though he acted thus only by chance reasoning, all the demonologists, even the Reverend Montague Summers, would have nodded approval. Is this not the way to foil the black wisdom of the *Grand Albert?* Did not Prospero thus inter his grimoires, in the fifth act of *The Tempest?*

Now back to the house once more, and into the kitchen. It was even darker than

the parlor, but Gib could make out a basin on a stool by the moldy wall, and smelled an ugly pungency—Jael Bettiss had left her mixture of powdered water after last washing away her burden of false beauty.

Gib's feline nature rebelled at a wetting; his experience of witchcraft bade him be wary, but he rose on his hind legs and with his forepaws dragged at the basin's edge. It tipped and toppled. The noisome fluid drenched him. Wheeling, he ran back into the parlor, but paused on the doorstep. He spoke two more words that he remembered from Jael Bettiss. The lamp went out again.

And now he dashed around the house and through the brambles and to the quarry beyond.

It lay amid uninhabited wooded hills, a wide excavation from which had once been quarried all the stones for the village houses and pavements. Now it was full of water, from many thaws and torrents. Almost at its lip was parked John Frey's touring-car, with the top down, and beside it he lolled, slack-faced and dreamy. At his side, cloak-draped and enigmatically queenly, was Jael Bettiss, her back to the quarry, never more terrible or handsome. John Frey's eyes were fixed dreamily upon her, and her eyes were fixed commandingly on the figure in the front seat of the car—a slumped, defeated figure, hard to recognize as poor sick Ivy Hill.

"Can you think of no way to end all this pain, Miss Ivy?" the witch was asking. Though she did not stir, nor glance behind her, it was as though she had gestured toward the great quarry-pit, full to unknown depths with black, still water. The sun, at the very point of setting, made angry red lights on the surface of that stagnant pond.

"Go away," sobbed Ivy Hill, afraid without knowing why. "Please, please!"

"I'm only trying to help," said Jael Bettiss. "Isn't that so, John?"

"That's so, Ivy," agreed John, like a little boy who is prompted to an unfamiliar recitation. "She's only trying to help."

Gib, moving silently as fate, crept to the back of the car. None of the three human beings, so intent upon each other, saw him.

"Get out of the car," persisted Jael Bettiss. "Get out, and look into the water. You will forget your pain."

"Yes, yes," chimed in John Frey, mechanically. "You will forget your pain."

GIB scrambled stealthily to the running-board, then over the side of the car and into the rear seat. He found what he had hoped to find. Ivy Hill's purse—and open.

He pushed his nose into it. Tucked into a little side-pocket was a hard, flat rectangle, about the size and shape of a visiting-card. All normal girls carry mirrors in their purses—all mirrors show the truth. Gib clamped the edge with his mouth, and struggled to drag the thing free.

"Miss Ivy," Jael Bettiss was commanding, "get out of this car, and come and look into the water of the quarry."

No doubt what would happen if once Ivy Hill should gaze into that shiny black abyss; but she bowed her head, in agreement or defeat, and began slowly to push aside the catch of the door.

Now or never, thought Gib. He made a little noise in his throat, and sprang up on the side of the car next to Jael Bettiss. His black-stained face and yellow eyes were not a foot from her.

She alone saw him; Ivy Hill was too sick, John Frey too dull. "What are you doing here?" she snarled, like a bigger and fiercer cat than he; but he moved closer still, holding up the oblong in his teeth. Its back was uppermost, covered with imitation leather, and hid the real nature of it. Jael Bettiss was mystified, for once in her relationship with Gib. She took the thing from him, turned it over, and saw a reflection.

She screamed.

The other two looked up, horrified through their stupor. The scream that Jael Bettiss uttered was not deep and rich and young; it was the wild, cracked cry of a terrified old woman.

"I don't look like that," she choked out, and drew back from the car. "Not old—ugly——"

Gib sprang at her face. With all four claw-bristling feet he seized and clung to her. Again Jael Bettiss screamed, flung up her hands, and tore him away from his hold; but his soggy fur had smeared the powdered water upon her face and head.

Though he fell to earth, Gib twisted in midair and landed upright. He had one glimpse of his enemy. Jael Bettiss, no mistake—but a Jael Bettiss with hooked beak, rheumy eyes, hideous wry mouth and yellow chisel teeth—Jael Bettiss exposed for what she was, stripped of her lying mask of beauty!

And she drew back a whole staggering step. Rocks were just behind her. Gib saw, and flung himself. Like a flash he clawed his way up her cloak, and with both forepaws ripped at the ugliness he had betrayed. He struck for his home that was forbidden him — Marco Bozzaris never strove harder for Greece, nor Stonewall Jackson for Virginia.

Jael Bettiss screamed yet again, a scream loud and full of horror. Her feet had slipped on the edge of the abyss. She flung out her arms, the cloak flapped from them like frantic wings. She fell, and Gib fell with her, still tearing and fighting.

The waters of the quarry closed over them both.

GIB thought that it was a long way back to the surface, and a longer way to shore. But he got there, and scrambled out with the help of projecting rocks. He shook his drenched body, climbed back into the car and sat upon the rear seat. At least Jael Bettiss would no longer drive him from the home he loved. He'd find food some way, and take it back there each day to eat. . . .

With tongue and paws he began to rearrange his sodden fur.

John Frey, clear-eyed and wide awake, was leaning in and talking to Ivy Hill. As for her, she sat up straight, as though she had never known a moment of sickness.

"But just what did happen?" she was asking.

John Frey shook his head, though all the stupidity was gone from his face and manner. "I don't quite remember. I seem to have wakened from a dream. But are you all right, darling?"

"Yes, I'm all right." She gazed toward the quarry, and the black water that had already subsided above what it had swallowed. Her eyes were puzzled, but not frightened. "I was dreaming, too," she said. "Let's not bother about it."

She lifted her gaze, and cried out with joy. "There's that old house that daddy owns. Isn't it interesting?"

John Frey looked, too. "Yes. The old witch has gone away—I seem to have heard she did."

Ivy Hill was smiling with excitement. "Then I have an inspiration. Let's get daddy to give it to us. And we'll paint it over and fix it up, and then——" She broke off, with a cry of delight. "I declare, there's a cat in the car with me!"

It was the first she had known of Gib's presence.

John Frey stared at Gib. He seemed to have wakened only the moment before. "Yes, and isn't he a thin one? But he'll be pretty when he gets through cleaning himself. I think I see a white shirt-front."

Ivy Hill put out a hand and scratched Gib behind the ear. "He's bringing us good luck, I think. John, let's take him to live with us when we have the house fixed up and move in."

"Why not?" asked her lover. He was gazing at Gib. "He looks as if he was getting ready to speak."

But Gib was not getting ready to speak. The power of speech was gone from him, along with Jael Bettiss and her enchantments. But he understood, in a measure, what was being said about him and the house in the hollow. There would be new life there, joyful and friendly this time. And he would be a part of it, forever, and of his loved home.

He could only purr to show his relief and gratitude.

# The Sorcerer's Apprentice

THE weird legend of the Sorcerer's Apprentice, known to the modern world by the poetry of Goethe and the music of Dukas, was related by Lucian in the *Philopseudes*. Here is the legend, in Sir Thomas More's translation:

When a certain Eucrates saw an Egyptian magician named Pancrates do many marvels, he gradually insinuated himself into his friendship until he learned nearly all his secrets. At last the magician persuaded him to leave all his servants in Memphis and accompany him alone, for they would have no lack of servants; and from that time (Eucrates said) thus we lived.

"When we came into an inn, he taking the bolt of the door, or a broom or bar, and clothing it, spoke a charm to it, and to enable it to go, and in all things to resemble a man. The thing going forth, would draw water, provide, and dress our supper, and diligently wait and attend upon us. After his business was done, he pronounced another charm, and turned the broom into a broom again, and the pestle into a pestle. This was an art which, though I labored much, I could not learn of him. For this was a mystery which he denied me, though in all things else he were open.

"One day, hiding myself in a dark corner, I overheard his charm, which was but three syllables. He having appointed the bolt its business, went into the market.

"The next day, he having some other appointment in the market, I taking the pestle and appareling it, in like manner pronounced the syllables, and bid it fetch me some water. When it had brought me a basin full, 'It is enough,' I said, 'fetch no more, but be a pestle again.' But it was so far from obeying me, that it ceased not to fetch water till it had overflown the room. I, much troubled at the accident, and fearing lest if Pancrates return (as he did) he would be much displeased, took an ax and cut the pestle in two. Then both parts taking several buckets fetched water. And instead of one, I had two servants.

"In the meantime Pancrates came in, and perceiving what had happened, transformed them into wood again, as they were before I uttered the spell. Shortly after he secretly left me, and vanishing went I know not whither."

# The Lady of the Bells

By SEABURY QUINN

*A romantic weird tale that spans the shadowy years between our own time and the cruel Thirteenth Century when Simon de Montfort was ravaging the fair land of Provence with fire and sword*

ELLIS paused upon the threshold as his key clicked in the lock. The entranceway to the studio was dark and enigmatic as a tunnel; beyond, the lesser gloom of the workroom was gray with early-twilight monotones; save for the dripping of a leaky spigot in the bathroom the place was quiet as a mausoleum, yet he had a feeling he was not alone.

"Hullo?" he challenged, snapping on the wall switch.

His voice came echoing back at him; the sparsely furnished studio had the resonance of an empty auditorium. Stepping softly, and with stick in readiness, he went completely through the place, snapping on the lights before him, searching every room with a sharp glance before he entered. Everything was empty and in order: entrance foyer, workroom, bedroom, bath. The light, thin film of dust that gathered where the sloping skylight joined the wall was intact; the ash-crowned pile of cigarette butts in the brass bowl by his working-stool jarred from a cone to a low mound as he walked by. There was proof. If anyone had been there the impact of his feet surely would have disturbed those butts as he went by. Sense and reason told him he was the sole occupant of the place, yet the feeling of another presence persisted. Not sinister. Quite the contrary. But he didn't relish company. He had a job to do, and art was long and time increasingly fleeting.

The times, as a Frenchman would have put it, did not "make fair" for Clairbourn Ellis. Small things annoyed him, put him off his stride, made good work difficult. And for a long time he had been the victim of a string of persecutions.

First, about the regiment. Like his father and grandfather, he'd held a commission in the 369th, one of the last remaining cavalry outfits in the Guard. An outfit with traditions, that. Historic names streamed from its colors: Monterey, Buena Vista, Chapultepec, Chancellorsville, Antietem, Gettysburg, the Argonne. Now it had been mechanized, made into a squad of motorcycle cops and taxi-drivers. His resignation had been in the mail the same day that the last review with horses had been held.

Then, there was Irene Chandler. He hadn't been in love with her—not too much, anyway. But he'd known her all his life, and gone to school and played and danced with her. Life seemed less complete since she had married Eddie Applegate.

"I don't love him as I could have loved you, Clairbourn," she'd told him frankly, "but he's—safe. He'll buy me a nice house in Larchmont or Montclair, give me a new car each year——"

"And fall asleep in his chair half an hour after dinner every night," Ellis broke in. "Look at him, Irene. Only thirty-two, and getting bald and paunchy already. He thinks he's exercising when he walks from Broad and Wall to Broadway; he doesn't know a Corot from a Rembrandt, and what he doesn't know about books——"

"From it, like a giant pendulum, swayed the figure of a man."

"He knows bank-books, Clair," she shut him off a little acidly. "That's more than you do. You were born about five hundred years too late, darling. If we were in the fourteen-thirties instead of today you'd be the perfect answer to a maiden's prayer, or a matron's, for that matter. Traipsing over Europe with your paints and brushes in a wallet at your back and your long sword belted to your waist; painting, drinking, brawling, rescuing beauty in distress and playing hell with every woman's heart from Florence to Sienna. Cellini might not be so well known today if you'd lived in his time. But you don't. We're in the Twentieth Century, and America. They say that you're the best man with a saber in the regiment. So what? That's like being able to wiggle your ears. Everyone can't do it, but what use is it? The fellow who can write a nice, fat check can do a better job of rescuing damsels in distress than the most accomplished swordsman in the world. There ain't no dragons left to kill these days, young feller.

"You're lots of fun, my dear, and summer skies and stars make a fine canopy

to play under, but I shan't always be a girl. There'll come a time when I'm too old to play, and then I'll want a roof above my head, and some assurance of three meals a day——"

"Right-o," he agreed with enthusiasm. "And a pew in church, and half a dozen kids, and flowers on the table when you entertain the dominie at dinner twice a month. Go to it, gal; high destiny is calling."

Then he kissed her three times, once for her, once for himself, once for the happy times they'd had together.

He spent much more than he could afford for a silver service for her, and donned a cutaway and stiff shirt—both of which he cordially detested—to act as usher at the wedding. Then, when the last handful of rice was thrown, he went out and got beautifully, completely and incomparably drunk.

During the sad, remorseful period of sobering up came the greatest blow of all. Old Sam Gulden—"Gulden's Greetings, Inc., A Card for Every Celebration"—turned his sketches for an Easter greeting down uncompromisingly.

"It ain't that I don't like your work, y'understand, my boy," he explained, "but them pitchers ain't th' kind I want that we should have this year. Crosses an' lilies an' little chicks an' ducks is all right, but not for Gulden's, Inc. We gotta have more class about our line, like them pitchers like you see up at the Met, or Anderson's—tall, slinky-lookin' dames dressed in red or blue or sumpin' leanin' over balconies, wid men in long hair and striped tights down on th' ground wid gee-tars in their hands, or mebbe flingin' roses up to 'em. I seen a pitcher once called Lay Belly Dame Sands Mercy. It wuz a pip. That's th' general idea, if you know wot I mean. Them chickie-wickie, duckie-wuckie cards is all right for a second line, but I can buy all them I want for ten-fifteen dollars. I'm payin' you foldin' money, boy. You should ought to paint me sumpin' wid real class."

"Umph?" Clairbourn answered. "I could do you a scene in the Pre-Raphaelite style, but it'll take at least a month. Can't let you have it for a cent under five hundred."

Mr. Gulden waved a pudgy hand and called on heaven to witness his disinclination to discuss finances. "Did I ask you the price?" he demanded in an injured voice. "You do th' work real classy, Ellis boy, an' me an' you won't have no lawsuits about money."

PROMISING a picture in Burne-Jones' or Rosetti's style was one thing, completing it before the year-end something else; and the deadline was December 31. After two weeks' preparation, visiting art galleries, making sketches, throwing them away, then beginning at the start once more, Clairbourn was prepared to tear his hair, throw his best hat down on the floor, and jump on it. Inspiration would not come, and time was ticking off remorselessly. At last in desperation he had crossed the River, rented a small studio in Poplar Street, and shut himself in with his work. But inspiration lagged in Brooklyn, even as it mocked him in Manhattan and Westchester. After three weeks of immurement he had turned out one fair imitation of the Pot of Basil, something reminiscent of Beata Beatrix, and what might have been a smudgy carbon copy of Cophetua and the Beggar Maid. Into the incinerator they had gone, and Ellis faced a virgin canvas as the ides of December approached.

Then inspiration came like Promethean fire. Walking home from dinner at Joe's, Ellis passed a brightly lighted bar, and had to dodge to keep from collision with a convivial customer who came reeling from the tavern with a love of all mankind in

his heart and a snatch of nursery rime upon his lips:

Ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross
To see a fine lady upon a white horse.
Rings on her fingers, and bells on her toes . . .

Ellis almost hugged the fellow. There she was—his model! His mind reeled back, like a motion-picture film run through the projector in reverse. Once more he was a little fellow, three, perhaps four years old, almost petrified with terror from a dreadful dream, lying in the darkened nursery, fighting with the fright that still oppressed him for courage to call Mother. Dreadful shapes were lurking in the darkness. Behind the dresser crouched an ogre, bloody-toothed and ravenous for little boys; the chiffirobe gave ambush, but did not conceal, a green-eyed witch with long, sharp talons on her claw-like hands and hideously dank and stringy hair about her bony face; beneath the chair there crouched a yellow dwarf with a great sack upon his twisted back—even Teddy Bear's glass eyes shone with a cold malevolence. Then, faint as sleighbells heard from the highway down by the river, came the clinking jingle-jangle of small silver chimes. In a moment she was there, the lovely little lady from the Mother Goose Book; her white horse with his silver-embroidered saddle-cloth and gold-bossed bridle stamped and pawed the frozen ground outside the window, and, accompanied by the music of the little bells that jingled on her feet, the lovely little lady stepped across the sill and came to him across the dark and fright-filled nursery.

She was very little, scarcely larger than himself, but she was very lovely. Her soft, close-fitting gown clung to her like a molded sheath of moonlight, and in the pale beam that shone on her she herself seemed a creature of the moonglow. Her silken hair, which hung in two long braids each side her face and down her shoulders, had a sheen of lunar silver; the rose-like mouth and violet eyes alone gave color to the misty oval of her face. She bent above him, smiling, and put soft hands on his face. Their touch was wonderfully comforting; he could feel the panic beating of his heart subside as the faintly spicy scent of clove and orange blossoms came to him from her hair and gown and body. Presently he slept, and when he wakened sunlight flooded through the nursery, the furniture was just furniture, Teddy Bear was just a thing of cloth and glass and sawdust. There were no dwarfs nor ogres nor witches anywhere about, and hardly any memory of them.

But memory of the lovely little lady stayed. Mother laughed and Nurse was cross when he talked about her; so by and by he ceased to speak of her, but every night he lay awake and watched for her, and more than once he cried himself to sleep because she did not come.

He hadn't thought about her for ten years and more that night he sneaked away from the Tau Delta Theta dance to sit in the parked car with Edith Marlow. Edith was a pretty thing, with bright brown eyes and bright brown hair and bright, keen, sometimes mordant wit. All the boys were wild about her, and tradition had it that the word "No" had no place in her vocabulary. She snuggled down beside him in the front seat, and the pliancy of her surrender had more of practised skill than artlessness about it. Moonlight filtered through the swaying, blossom-burdened boughs, the road was barred with bands of ebony and silver; from the clubhouse came the chiming of a staff of little bells as the orchestra played a swing version of *Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix.* The music was a parody, but the bells . . . the riming, chiming tinkle of small silver bells . . . the white horse stamping just outside the nursery window, the little pretty lady bend-

ing over him and smiling half tenderly, half longingly . . . all at once the girl who pressed against him seemed a form of common clay, the hands that clasped his cheeks seemed coarse and harsh, compared in memory with the hands that soothed him in the moonlit darkness of the nursery.

Gently—a fellow can't be rough about such things—he disengaged himself. "Let's dance," he whispered, almost sobbed.

"Dance?" Edith echoed, gathering her aplomb with an air of injured dignity such as a cat displays when dropped unceremoniously from an erstwhile friendly lap. "What d'ye mean, dance? D'ye think I came 'way out here just to dance?"

Phil Tracy passed him as he made his way unsteadily back to the clubhouse. "Okay if I take over, Clair?" he called.

"Sure, the keys are in it," Ellis answered. "Try to get back by two, though, Phil." He saw the white of Edith's arms make a bar dexter across Phil's black dinner coat as he glanced back.

The car was wrecked, Phil Tracy killed and Edith hopelessly crippled when they collided with a truck at Dead Man's Curve. One-handed driving, swigs from a hip-flask and frequent long embraces create hazards when the car is doing sixty and the highway set with curves and filled with lumbering trucks.

Naturally, he went to Phil's funeral. An eery ripple traced his spine as the flower-decorated casket wheeled past him down the church aisle. "There go I, but for the grace of—the lovely little lady," he told himself in an awed whisper.

"THANKS, feller, and happy landings," he called to the lurching drunk as he avoided his embrace. "I'll remember that."

"Huh?" the other asked. "Wash 'at? Whash y'gonna remember? Shay, you wanna fight?"

"Not with you, old top, you've given me an inspiration," Ellis grinned, and hurried down Hicks Street to his studio. Five minutes after he had let himself in he was working on a picture with the lovely little lady's memory as a model.

At first the work had been no task at all. In less than half an hour he had sketched the figure in, and while the graphite was still new upon the canvas he knew how he would paint her. Instead of the moon-whited gown she wore when she came to him in the nursery he would show her in a green robe with faint purple sleeves, sheath-tight about the bust and waist and hips, falling to a rippling fullness at the bottom. It was to be an Easter motif; she should show mixed joy and devotion. He joined her long, slim, pearl-pale hands with pearls upon the fingers palm to palm before her breast, drew her kneeling with one slim red velvet-shod foot peeping from the hem of her green gown, and—"bells on her toes so she shall have music"—tipped the bottine's pointed end with a small silver hawk-bell.

The face had given him some trouble. He intended to portray her with the long-remembered, somewhat wistful, wholly tender smile, but it seemed his brush had a volition of its own. When he tried to force it, it resisted, like a gyroscope when an attempt is made to change its axis. "All right," he muttered when the almost animate perversion of the brush continued for ten minutes, "have it your way. Let's see what you can do." He shut his eyes and grinned, resting his brush tip against the canvas.

For thirty seconds, possibly a minute, nothing happened; then, at first slowly, but with gathering speed, like the table of a ouija board as it begins moving, the brush acquired motion. He could feel it twitching in his fingers, almost like a living thing—or something controlled by an outside force. A minute, two, five, ten, he sat with closed eyes, making random dabs

against the canvas. Then: "Let's see what sort of mess I've made," he muttered as he opened his eyes.

He almost fell off of the stool in his astonishment. A face had taken form above the low-cut, purple-sleeved green gown, and it was the face of his remembrance, but not as he remembered it. The head was held a little back; fringed lids were drooped on plumbless violet eyes, almost concealing them; the full red lips were slightly parted in beatitude; the whole face in its frame of gilded hair was entranced, longing. "Like a nun, breathless with adoration," he thought; then: "No, not quite." Rather, it was yearning, pleading, entreating; rapt in a perfect ecstasy of petition. Every pulse and nerve and cell and fiber of her being seemed called upon to give force to the prayer; it seemed as if the very substance of her soul were poured out in the appeal she made. The fervor of it almost terrified him.

Only once before had he seen such a look of utter self-surrender to entreaty on a human face. That was at a spiritualistic séance when the medium's control delayed his coming, and the distraught woman poured her spiritual energies out in a petition to her spirit guide. He hadn't any faith in ghosts or spirits, but the happenings of that night were like a nightmare when he thought of them—the mocking voices issuing from the trumpet, solid objects seemingly deprived of weight and floating bubble-light about the room; finally the whitely-luminous face, strained with malevolence, that took form in the darkness and leered and grimaced at the company. Then the choking, rasping cry of the medium, the confusion when the lights were turned up and they found her sitting in her chair, stiff with a paralytic stroke.

He'd thought of putting in a chapel background, possibly a painted window picking up and echoing the muted greens and reds and purples of her costume, with the nimbus of a saint to repeat the bright glory of her rose-gold hair, but here again he found his touch a fumbling one until he ceased to make a conscious effort at depiction. After that the pigments seemed to find their places of their own volition. Six hours' work completed the setting, a garden traced with sanded paths, with here and there a deep, still pool where golden carp played roguishly among the roots of star-shaped water lilies. Against a wall of weathered brick old rose trees shook their blossoms out like banners in the still, calm air of gathering evening, and trailing jessamine climbed across the coping. Beyond, at the sides, showed the deep-green foliage of olive trees set in rank on marching rank until they faded in the misty purple of the horizon. In the far background was a white-walled house with red-tiled roof and a wide entranceway barred by a grille of fancifully wrought iron. To the right, upon a pedestal, was the painted figure of a plaster saint, red-cloaked and red-haired, gowned in white and holding in her hand what seemed to be an embrocation-jar of alabaster.

HE DROPPED into a chair to contemplate the picture. "Devilish good, if I do say so as shouldn't," he told himself, then stopped with a grin. "Maybe I ought, at that," he added. "If I told a spiritualist how that daub came into being he'd swear that Osceola or Little-Moose-Face-in-the-Wilderness got hold of me and acted as my spirit guide to paint the thing while I was in a trance.

"All right, spirits, s'pose we have a little séance, just you and me," he suggested as he rose.

There was a bottle of Scotch in the bathroom and a siphon of seltzer chilling by the bedroom window. The picture was completed—old Sam would do a buck and wing when he saw it—"real class"—and

he was two full weeks ahead of schedule. The circumstances warranted a drink or two—or three.

He poured a tot of whisky in the glass and shot the soda hissing into it.

"Here's to you, little lovely lady," he proposed and held the tumbler toward the picture. "You came to me so long ago when I was frightened witless, the memory of you saved my life once, now you're going to bring me a fat fee."

He tossed the whisky-soda off and refilled the glass.

"Wish I could do something for you in return," he told the kneeling figure between sips. "Wonder who you were, and when and where you lived, or if you ever lived at all? Most old nursery rimes have some fact-foundation. *London Bridge Is Falling Down* commemorates the inhumation of a girl in the foundations to insure their permanency, Jack Horner was the Abbot of Glastonbury's steward, and a thieving rascal in the bargain; but who the deuce were you? Anyway, I wish I'd known you in the flesh."

The potent liquor was beginning to take hold. Clairbourn was growing slightly maudlin; on the point of sympathizing tearfully with himself.

"So bein' the best swordsman in the regiment's like wigglin' your ears?" he murmured as he splashed a fresh supply of whisky into the glass without diluting soda. "Just a trick, she called it—a devilish, useless trick. Man with the fat bank account's the one to rescue damsels in distress these days. No need for strong right arms and skill in swordsmanship. I bet you wouldn't have said that. Bet you'd have put some value on a man's skill with the saber."

He drew a deep draft from the tumbler and bent forward in his chair, eyes narrowed.

The unshaded hundred-watt lamps hanging from the ceiling glared down on the painting, giving it a garish look, bringing out its highlights, emphasizing its shadows. An odd optical illusion: The scene seemed three-dimensioned, like one of those old double photographs folks used to look at through twin lenses of a stereoscope in the days when *Mr. Dooley* and *The Shade of the Old Apple Tree* were musical hits of the season. The white-walled, red-tiled house seemed half a mile away, the olive trees stretched almost to infinity, the kneeling girl before the painted saint was almost beyond shouting-call.

Staggering slightly, he crossed the studio and snapped the ceiling fixture off. That was better; in the subdued light of the wall sconces the picture took on twilight aspects, its bright colors were muted, its shadows dimmed until they were mere patches of darkness.

He dropped into his chair again and resumed contemplation of his work. It was a clever bit of composition, no doubt of it. The realism of the scene was almost photographic. There was depth and color there, almost a suggestion of motion. . . . Almost? By the Lord Harry, there was motion! It was like a view glimpsed in a camera's finder. The branches of the olive trees were swaying lightly in the evening breeze, a rose-tree dropped a shower of petals, the trailing jessamine was waving in the wind.

"Boy," he assured himself, "you're inebriated. You're spifflicated; you're pie-eyed. Drunk as a hard-boiled owl. What you need is one more little drink."

The bottle-throat made little clattering noises on the tumbler-rim as he spattered whisky into the glass. Some of it spilled against his hand and soaked his cuff. Carefully, steadying one hand with the other, he raised the drink to his lips, eyes glued to the picture. "Ride a cock horse," he hummed between hiccups. "See a fine lady with rings on her fingers an' bells on her

toes . . . ride a cock horse to—only wish I could . . ." And, suddenly, then. . . .

HIS steed was a big mettlesome animal, too large for pure Arab, too finely made to have much Flemish in him, and black as moonless midnight. The saddle was the easiest he had ever ridden, extremely high at pommel and cantle, with a deeply curving seat. It was made without skirts, but the long blue saddle-cloth of quilted silk fended his legs from the horse's sides. The stirrups were of hammered silver, wider in the tread than he was used to, but very comfortable. The feet pressed in the stirrups were cased in boots of well oiled russet leather. Soldier's boots they were—trust a cavalryman to recognize them—soft, pliable, well cut, and, apparently, well worn, too. The hands upon the brass-bossed bridle were gloved in leather similar to the boots, good, serviceable cavalry gauntlets, and above their cuffs showed fustian sleeves of Lincoln green.

Glancing quickly down he saw his body was encased in a cuirass of brass inlaid with silver in the design of a lion's face surrounded by a bristling mane.

The road was well made, tiled with plinths of stone laid end to end with nice precision, but the scenery each side was gloomy and forbidding. Through the gathering dusk which blurred all outlines the dark green foliage of the olive trees made clouds of tossing shadow. There was no chirp of bird or cheep of insect, only the persistent rustle of a small breeze in the branches and the rhythmic clatter of his horse's hooves against the paving-stones broke silence. He might have been in a ghost-world, a world which once had lived and smiled back at a smiling sun, but now lived only in the melancholy memory of its former life.

By the roadside something white glowed ghastlily against the gnarled bole of an olive tree. A scarecrow? Dear heaven, no! He recognized it as he drew rein. The body of a man, stripped staring-nude, and nailed by hands and feet against the tree, the arms outstretched against two diverse branches as if upon the transverse beam of a cross, the body bowed back on a bend in the trunk. The head had fallen on the breast, long black hair trailing dankly round the ears and down across the sweat-dewed brow; little rivulets of blood had trickled down the palms and wrists and insteps, and dribbled into little puddles on the mold-strewn earth. A poniard had been thrust into the bare breast, and from it hung a slab of wood hacked from the tree with a legend burned into it:

*Pour décourager les hérétiques*

"Good heavens!" Ellis viewed the grisly relic with a shudder. "You have 'em, boy, no doubt of it. You've got the D.T.'s, no mistake. Take it easy, now; you'll soon be out of it. Don't let it get you down—"

Self-admonition ended on a startled "Hey!" Pounding hooves beat on the flint-paved roadway, shouts of rage rang in his ears as three men dashed out from the shelter of the olive grove, riding at him furiously, swords flashing in their hands.

They seemed very young and undersized, scarcely more than boys, but what they lacked in stature they made up in fury. And they were three to one. Instinctively he reached toward his pommel for his saber. There was nothing there, and, panic-stricken, he wheeled to flee when the banging of a weight against his left leg halted his maneuver. Next instant he had whipped a length of steel from the scabbard belted to his waist, and, head bent, charged against his adversaries.

Had they held together they could have overmastered him, for though one of them might have gone down before his charge the other two could have closed on him like a vise. But the suddenness of his at-

tack seemed to unnerve them, and they drew apart, slashing at him as he thundered past. He felt a dull blow on his head—like a saber stroke against a fencing-cage—and realized he must be wearing some sort of a helmet. As yet he'd had no chance to make an inventory of his costume.

A point jabbed at his breast, but turned off harmlessly from his cuirass, while a third blade struck him on the shoulder, glancing from the passegarde of his breast-plate and shocking his left arm to momentary numbness. Then they were on him once more, and he was fighting for his life.

Without much method, but in white-hot rage, they rode at him, driving their horses against his, cutting, slashing, hacking, stabbing with their long straight swords. He parried their blows easily, beating down one blade to engage with another, then turning that aside to hack a third out of his way.

And as he fought his anger grew. What the devil did these kids mean, ganging up on him this way? He might be dreaming, or in an alcoholic fantasy; somehow, even, he might be translated to another time and place; but he'd done no harm to anyone. Why did they set on him? Maybe they were brigands, highwaymen. "Yea bo, treat 'em rough!" he yelled the slogan of the Three-Six-Ninth, and closed with one of his opponents, slashing at his shoulder.

The boy—he was no man—was dressed in a buff jerkin of some untanned quilted leather, and at its top, about his throat, he wore an iron gorget, but both the armor and the garment were too big for him, and between them gaped an unprotected space an inch or more in width. It was at this that Clairbourn's saber chopped, hewing through the shoulder muscles and the tendons of the neck as though they had been tallow.

He saw the youngster's face contort with sudden agony, heard the scream of torment shrilling from his twisted lips, and turned to ward a sword-point from his face as a second lad lunged at him. Shortening his blade he flung himself back and thrust defensively. His adversary dashed at him with a shrieked imprecation, running full upon his point. It ran directly in his opened mouth, and with a cry of deafening shrillness he half turned in the saddle, clawed at the blade with blindly groping hands, and toppled sidewise from his horse, his dying scream stifled to a sickening gurgle as his throat filled up with blood.

Now they were man to man, and Ellis would have temporized with the remaining youth, but the lad was lacking in discretion as he was in fear. Twice he had stabbed at Ellis from behind, both blows turned by the cuirass; now he charged straight at him with upraised blade, and as Clairbourn caught the downstroke on his edge he felt the shock upon his shoulder muscles. This one was stronger than his comrades, though slower and less skilled. He had the advantage of a mail shirt and steel sallet, however, and though Ellis struck him several times his blows seemed harmless.

At last: "All right, feller, if you want to trade slugs, I'm your man!" Clairbourn exclaimed, and swinging in his seat to dodge a devastating slash, chopped at the other's head with all his might. His broad blade caught the lad's helmet between the ridge and rim, ringing like a clapper on a bell, and he felt the tingle in his hand and forearm as steel shattered against steel. His adversary toppled like a tree uprooted by the wind, and a spate of blood gushed down his face. The blade of Ellis' sword had sheared clear through the steel cap, cleaving through the wearer's leathern coif and scalp and skull, and breaking with the force of its own blow.

Ellis threw the useless shattered sword away, and looked down at his fallen foes. Now that the excitement of the fight was done he felt suddenly exhausted, tired almost to swooning, and a little sick. It was one thing to be a good swordsman, skilled in fencing and in practise with the Turk's-head and quintain, quite another to engage in combat to the death. In all his ten years' service with the Guard he'd never seen a blow struck or shot fired in anger, never seen a man die or, indeed, viewed a dead body, save those which had been ministered to by skilled morticians. Now within a quarter-hour he'd seen the raw products of homicide, the dead man nailed against the tree and the three corpses in the road. These lads had been instinct with life a little while ago, now—he retched at sight of them.

"Still," he rationalized, "it was they or me. I didn't attack and I'd have called it off if they would."

But the stiffening corpses seemed to look at him accusingly. He turned away and set spurs to his mount, steadfastly resisting inclination to look back. Where he was going he had no idea. Only one thing he knew: this dream—perhaps this alcoholic hallucination—had dumped him in a wild, fierce, hostile world, sometime in the middle of the Thirteenth Century, judging by his outfit and the costumes of his fallen adversaries. Anywhere he went would be a better place than where he was, for he was alone and without a weapon.

"Come on, big feller, step on it!" He shook the bridle gently, lifting his mount from a trot to a gallop, and from a gallop to a pounding run.

A LONG and gently sloping hill stretched before him, and as he reached its brow he paused to take some sort of bearing. Cutting perpendicularly across the tiled road was an earthen trail, deeply rutted with the tracks of ox-carts. At the intersection of the ways was a stone cross upon a battered pillar; a little to the right, perhaps a hundred yards away, was a cleared space, and in its center loomed a gibbet. From the gallows beam a length of rope depended, and from it, like a giant pendulum, swayed the body of a man, chains clanking on its wrists and ankles. Perched on the crosstree was a pair of ravens, and as Ellis took the eldritch scene in one of them spread its wings and fluttered toward the swaying corpse. But before the obscene fowl had a chance to flesh its beak in the poor bloated face a cry came from the olive trees and a young girl ran forward, waving her arms wildly as she ran. She stopped halfway to the gibbet, reached down and took up a stone which she flung with more than usual feminine accuracy at the raven. The pebble missed its mark but struck the gallows with a sharp crack, and in a moment both the birds of prey had taken awkward flight, croaking raucously at her.

"Good work, sister!" Ellis called as he turned his horse toward her.

She started at his hail, lips parted, eyes dilated, bosom heaving. She was a pretty thing, with dark, unkempt hair falling to her shoulders, large black eyes and red, ripe, rather bulbous lips. Her costume consisted of two garments, a white chemise which hung unfastened to the waist and showed the swelling rondure of her breasts, and a short, wide petticoat of bright red, reaching halfway to her ankles. For a moment she looked at him with fear-widened eyes, then crossed herself and shrank away.

"Hold on," he ordered. "Don't be afraid; I wouldn't hurt——"

*"Croisé!"* she spat the word at him as if it were the vilest of vile epithets, and put her thumb into her mouth, biting it savagely before she snapped her hand at him. *"Croisé détestable!"*

Next instant she turned on her slim bare

feet and darted for the shelter of the olive grove as if she were a rabbit coursed by hounds.

"H'm, I seem about as popular as a skunk at a lawn party," Ellis muttered, bewildered. "Those fellows tried to kill me and the girl bites her thumb at me." He bent his head in thought a moment. "*Croisé,*" she had called him, "*croisé détestable*—detestable crusader?" Why? He'd always thought crusaders were swell guys, oath-bound to succor the distressed, rescuing Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the Turks, doing good to everybody except —"Hey, wait a minute," he broke in on his estimate of the days of chivalry. "Wasn't there a crusade once that didn't fight the Turks—sometime in the Thirteenth Century, when Simon de Montfort sacked the Languedoc? Good Lord! Suppose . . ."

Was that the explanation of the man nailed to the olive tree, the way the youngsters set on him when he stopped by the body, the young girl's fright and hatred? He remembered, now. For seven bloody years de Montfort and his cohorts ravaged Provence and the Languedoc, plundering and murdering at will, crucifying captured knights on their own olive trees, choking wells with corpses, devastating everything with fire and sword, and rooting out the troubadours as if they had been vermin. In a situation such as that of course all strangers were suspect. Those not for the Provençals were against them, and no stranger would be for them. The three lads who had attacked him were part of Ramon of Toulouse's scattered guerrillas—poor little devils, why hadn't they challenged him and given him a chance to explain? And the poor girl was some homeless country lass hiding in the olive grove and driving off the ravens from the body of her executed brother or father, possibly her husband.

He felt about for some weapon. In his girdle was a dagger, hardly larger than a hunting-knife, but it would do. Riding to the corpse, he cut the rope that held it to the gibbet, lowered it to the grass and arranged its hands and feet, drawing up the dead man's shirt to hide his swollen features and protruding eyes. It was impossible to dig a grave with nothing but the dagger, but he cut some turf and laid it on the body, then, this symbolic burial accomplished, rode slowly toward the highway. All the time he worked he had a feeling eyes were on him, hostile eyes, eyes filled with hatred so hot that it burned the tears away. As he regained the road he thought he saw the flash of a white chemise and red petticoat among the olive trees ahead. "Probably running to give warning of my coming," he reflected grimly. He weighed the little dagger in his palm. Not much of a weapon, but maybe he could bring one of 'em down before they finished him.

COPPERY clouds pressed low on the horizon and a rising wind pushed them closer. In the upper sky a brassy, unreal light shone dimly, overlaying everything with a faint yellow tinge, making the road glow with a metallic luster. The storm's shrill pursuivants were sounding in the trees, and the leaves were shuddering together. He shook his bridle once more, urging the horse down the long slope toward the shadow-shrouded valley.

Now here and there rocks thrust from the soil, occasionally gullies scored the banks which rose each side the road. Once or twice he passed a small cave, black and tomb-like, hollowed by rain-water between rising boulders.

Then, suddenly, the storm was on him. Like a curtain drawn across the sky the darkness came, and with it came the hissing, stinging rain, almost as cold as sleet and striking with a force like hail. In a minute he was wet through to the skin,

and shivering with the clamminess of his dank garments. The horse's guess was quite as good as his; neither of them knew the road, nor where it led. He loosed the rein and bent his head against the drenching downpour, wondering what was coming next. Twice his mount slipped upon the rain-slicked road; at the third stumble Ellis swung down from the saddle, looped the bridle in the crook of his elbow, and proceeded cautiously afoot. This was no time for taking chances; another slip might break the horse's leg, or his neck, possibly both.

Just how far he'd walked he had no accurate idea, but it was some thirty minutes since he had dismounted when he saw a feeble glow of light between two great rocks standing like twin doorposts at the entrance of a cave.

"Come on, boy, shelter," he said to the steed as he turned toward the little cavern.

Someone was inside, obviously; probably they would be hostile, but perhaps he could make friends with them before they attacked. At any rate it was worth trying.

"A friend," he called as he entered the cave, "I am a—how the devil did you say it?—*Je suis d'ami!*"

Two forms were silhouetted by the firelight, one a man's and one a woman's. The man was clothed in a long gown of brownish stuff, shaven-headed and barefooted, with a corded girdle round his waist. A friar, Ellis decided, though he could not place his order accurately.

Before the friar knelt a woman, hands clasped and head bowed as in prayer, but at the sound of Clairbourn's hail she raised her face and he started in surprise. Those wide-set violet eyes, that small red mouth, that mane of copper-alloyed golden hair . . . he recognized her instantly, but before he could do more than exclaim in astonishment he was fighting for his breath, for the friar had hurled himself on him, grappling at his throat with unskilled but strong hands.

"Hey, take it easy, Father—Brother—whatever you are!" Ellis gasped as he broke the other's hold and pushed him back with a strong open-handed shove. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm just a storm-bound traveler, looking for a shelter from the rain——"

Astonished, he ceased speaking. It had suddenly come to him that the words he used were not English, not French, not in any language that he knew; but he used them fluently, never hesitating for a syllable, as though they were his mother-tongue. Moreover, the others understood him perfectly, and when they spoke in the strange tongue he understood them.

"But you spoke the cursed language of the North — the tongue of Montfort's men!" the friar panted. "Art not one of the thrice-accursed raiders——"

"I'll say I'm not—nay, good father, thou'rt mistaken," Ellis answered. "I am but newly come here, and the sights I see do grieve me sore. It is that I would help thee if I could, but what can one man, lone and weaponless, do against a host?"

"Every strong arm helps," the friar replied. "If thou art swordless, a blade can be procured for thee. Meanwhile, I must ask thee to retire to the cavern's mouth. The Lady Dezirada would complete her confession——"

"Why, certainly," agreed Clairbourn, "but why not do it in church, or at her house? A roadside cave seems a queer place——"

"Ha, now I know thou art a stranger, truly," interrupted the young monk. "Knowst not this whole unhappy land lies under interdict, and none may make confession, be baptized or wed or buried in the bosom of the Church until the Albigensian heresy has been uprooted, and the Languedoc despoiled and laid waste? What we do we must needs do in secret.

for to give a grant of absolution is forbidden. Nathless, there are those of us who were Provençals before they were churchmen; we know our own and minister to them despite the orders of the Lord Bishop and de Montfort's murderers."

"I see," responded Clairbourn, though actually he did not.

He walked to the cave entrance and stood looking at the rain until a hail came to him from the rear of the cavern.

"Wilt thou come and break bread with us, son?" the friar called.

A hanniper of woven rushes had been opened and from it the girl took a loaf of wheaten bread, two stone bottles of wine and a square of damasked linen which she spread upon the cave floor like a picnic cloth upon the grass. Kneeling, they waited for the brief grace which the monk pronounced, then set to with a will. The bread was coarse but light and very palatable, the wine more sour than dry, but full-bodied and blood-warming, and they all three ate with ravenous appetite.

As he followed his companions' lead and sopped his bread crusts in the wine Clairbourn studied the girl sitting on the ground across the cloth from him. She was very young, he thought, not more than seventeen or eighteen; with the pale, white, almost transparent skin which accompanies red-gold hair and purple eyes. Her head was small and proudly held, as if in consciousness of noble blood, her lips were very red and full; sad lips, sweet lips, ripely soft and made for kissing. Hers was a face of delicate and piquant loveliness, ivory-toned beneath the aureate brightness of her firelit hair, and there was lyric grace in every movement of her long, lithe body.

Her gown of sober dark green had the stark simplicity of a single garment, clinging softly at the bosom and shoulders, rounded at the neck, long-sleeved, with loose-cut cuffs that showed the lovely turning of her slender wrists, and flowing with a rippling fullness to her feet. A girdle of red silken tape was crossed about her waist, brought down to cross again above her hips, and tied in a loose knot with long ends at the front. Her hair was smoothly parted in the middle and bound with green silk ribbons in two braids as long and full as twin umbrella cases. Had she loosed it, Ellis thought, it would have fallen well below her knees and been thick enough to hide her like a veil. On her feet were shoes of red cloth, cut low as modern evening pumps, but with the ends turned up, and to each tip was fixed a little silver bell.

No doubt of it, she was the lovely little lady who had lived in his memory since childhood, the girl whom he had painted yesterday—or was it years ago, or centuries in the future? She flushed a little under his long scrutiny, and when she lowered lids demurely over violet eyes he saw her lashes were a startling black, and very long, and curled at the ends.

"Lord, what a rave she'd be on Broadway!" Ellis thought. "If I could only get her there——"

*"Hérétiques — conspirateurs!* Yield thee!" The shout reverberated in the small cave like a thunder-clap among the mountain peaks. "In the name of the Lord Bishop and of Simon Montfort I require your submission!"

At the entrance, almost blocking it with his tremendous bulk, stood a huge man, chain-mail glinting on his arms and legs, a knob-bossed breastplate on his body and a steel salade with raised vizor on his head. In one hand he held a long bare sword.

"We be no heretics, *beau sire,*" the monk declared. "We be good and loyal children of the Church and loyal subjects of our lord——"

"Ha, quotha?" cried the other. "Good Christians and no traitors, be ye? And

hiding like a nest of coneys in a burrow? *Pardi*', we'll make ye taller by a stretched neck, and as for yonder wench——"

THE friar leaped past Clairbourn, planting himself in the roaring bully's path. "Begone!" he ordered sharply. "I am a priest of Holy Church, and speak with her authority. Thou darest not lay finger on this woman under penalty of excommunication. In the name of our Lord——"

"Go make thy plaint to Him in person. I weary of thy mouthings," interrupted the big man, and ran his sword through the young priest's frail body.

Ellis stared in unbelieving horror. To attack an unarmed man, and that a priest, to kill him in cold blood. . . . He cleared the little distance separating him from the murderer, and before the other could withdraw his sword struck him in the face.

Taken by surprise, the big man staggered back, his sword released, blood streaming from his wounded mouth and such a look of stark astonishment upon his face as would have been comic in any other circumstances.

Scabbards rattled on mailed legs as two men-at-arms rushed into the cave with drawn swords. "Shall we cut him down, *Messire?*" one asked, swinging back his blade to slash at Clairbourn's undefended head.

"Nay, by God His holy angels, I'll tear his eyes out with my two hands!" bellowed the leader, and charged at Ellis with great hands extended.

This was easier than he had hoped. Half a dozen loving-cups in the adjutant's office bore the name of Clairbourn Ellis as defender of the regiment's prowess in the inter-regimental boxing matches. He was one of the best welterweights in the whole Guard—and this big ox charged at him with his head down.

"Easy on, son," he told himself as he squared away; "he's big, two hundred at the very least; straight up for the jaw, and keep clear of his arms; you're sunk if he grapples with you!"

The uppercut which he swung was a pure work of art, but he miscalculated slightly, and instead of crashing on the condyle of the jaw it caught his adversary on the nose. The blood flowed freely, but the big man only shook his head and charged again.

This time Ellis crashed a left hook to the chin, and his opponent seemed to stumble in his rush, as though his feet were tangled in an unseen net, but in a moment he regained his balance and pressed on with a bellowing roar.

"This guy's tough," Clairbourn muttered. And, indeed, he was. To giant's strength he added giant's stature, and ability to absorb shocks second only to a sandbag. There was just one thing to do, and Ellis set about it systematically.

Dancing round the cave he kept himself clear of the reaching hands, feinting, dodging, retreating constantly, and waiting watchfully for every opening. Steel protected most of his antagonist, a blow to the solar plexus would result in nothing but a broken hand; he could not numb his enemy by hammering his biceps, for the interlinked chain-mail upon the other's arms made him immune to any blow he could deliver. Only the big, broad, bestial face was vulnerable, and to this Clairbourn gave his whole attention. In succession he struck at the great oaf's eyes, missing them occasionally, but more often landing squarely on them; then, as the eyes began to puff and swell, and finally bleed, he gave attention to the lips and cheeks, pounding them with practised sureness till the flesh was purpled and the skin reduced to bleeding shreds.

At last the opportunity he sought arrived, and with a quick shove he pushed the Titan's helmet off, kicked it as it fell,

then danced away and picked it up. It was a shallow piece of headgear, shaped something like a sugar-scoop, worn with the rounded end forward, and fitted with a vizor-cage on pinions at the front. Hammered from a single sheet of steel, it weighed perhaps eight pounds and made an ideal instrument for his purpose. As his adversary staggered past, almost blinded and mad with pain and fury, Clairbourn swung the helmet like a club and brought it down with all his might straight on the shock of matted hair that crowned the bullet head.

The blow was devastating. With an exclamation which was half grunt, half startled yell, the big man stumbled, staggered to his knees, then sank slowly to the floor. Blood was welling from his ears; what seemed to be a bubble of gray-bloody stuff was oozing from his broken skull. Technically, he was dead before his bruised face struck the floor, but his great vitality persisted, like the muscular reflexes of a snake whose head has been crushed, and his arms and legs twitched with spasmodic tremors as he slumped to a position like one just about to turn a somersault, then slowly rolled upon his side and lay in an inert heap.

*"Domna Maria santissima!"* one of the men-at-arms exclaimed. "This is no man, but a devil! Who but a fiend with Satan's legions for his aids could overcome Dom Sebastian with his bare hands?"

Ellis swayed unsteadily. The fight had been a fierce one; he was all but exhausted. If they closed in on him now . . . he had no sword. . . . "Of course, I'm a devil!" he shouted, stepping toward them menacingly. "I'm a devil out of blazing hell with my shirt-tail all on fire!"

The foremost man-at-arms gave ground. If this fiend who beat the lustiest warrior in de Montfort's armies to death with his naked hands were to set on them . . .

"Man or devil, I'll have at thee, sirrah!" cried the second soldier. "Stand, Hilarius; we be two to one, and our cause is blessed by the Lord Bishop's self——"

The slapping patter of rope sandals on the paved road outside drowned his words as half a score of peasants rushed into the cave. "Ramon de Toulouse; Ramon!" came the war-cry, and the men-at-arm went down beneath a storm of flails and forks and scythe-blade pikes.

"Art safe, *Madomna?*" cried a shrill voice, and a girl in white chemise and red petticoat circled round the knot of peasants and threw herself upon her knees before the Lady Dezirada. "I raised the countryside as quickly as I could, for erewhile came a stranger to the Gallows Hill and cut poor Pedro down—*ohé, Maria Madre,* they have killed poor Frey Andrés!" she broke off with a scream as she saw the friar lying on the cavern floor, his shaven head couched on the kneeling Lady Dezirada's lap, a little stream of blood trickling from the corners of his mouth.

"Take him—there he is, the outlander!" she pointed an accusing hand at Ellis. "I recognize him; 'twas he who slew the valiant brothers Nizana in the olive grove where yestereve they crucified the good Sire Marcos——"

"Stand!" It was the Lady Dezirada's voice, calm and low, but absolute in command. "I do not know who he may be, but I know him for a brave and knightly gentleman. With his bare hands he beat the villain Sebastian to death when he had struck the good Frey Andrés down defenseless, and all unarmed he faced that pair of scurvy knaves and would have done them battle to prevent their taking me. Do him honor, all of you, for he is a mighty man of valor and would serve with us against the ravagers of the Languedoc."

So in a circle round Clairbourn and Lady Dezirada knelt the peasants, pledging loyalty to both, and swearing to obey their orders without question to the death.

Presently they made a litter for the dying monk and would have set him on their shoulders, but the Lady Dezirada bade them lower him so she could walk beside him with his hand in hers.

The storm had blown itself away, and the setting moon left the night dim beneath the high stars as the little procession emerged from the cave. From another cavern someone brought the Lady Dezirada's horse, a beautiful white Arab with silver-spangled saddle-cloth and gold-bossed bridle.

Ellis took his horse's reins in hand and walked behind the litter. By his side the little peasant girl whom he had met beneath the gallows led the lady's palfrey. And so they marched into the shadowed valley between rows of gently whispering olive trees.

THE delirium that heralds death had laid its finger on the friar's lips.

"Dezirada," he murmured between deep, laboring gasps, "was it wrong to love thee, Lady Dezirada, even after I had taken holy orders? I swear I never had a carnal thought of thee. Thou wert like a sight of heaven vouchsafed in this world of woe and wickedness; like the sainted Barbara or Cecily, more to worship than to love. When I knew thou never could be mine I swore to put the world away, and with it every thought of thee, but ah! I saw thy face in every painted window, every beautiful illumination in the missal minded me of thee; when I watched before the altar thine eyes looked at me from beneath the crown and wimple of Our Lady. I fasted long and scourged myself until the flagellum fell from my hand, yet always thoughts of thee were with me. The red wine of the blessed sacrament put me in mind of thy red lips; in the glory of the golden sunset I saw thy bright hair; the pallor of the limewash on my cell wall was less white than the fair throat and hands. God help me, I could not forget thee, or my love for thee, Dezirada!"

"Nay, Andrés," she replied softly—and Ellis noted that she did not say "Frey Andrés" — "soothly, God would not afflict His creatures willingly. If thou hadst thoughts of me it were no sin, for who but God implanted them in you—is not He called the God of love, albeit some who style themselves His ministers wreak hate in His name? If thou remembered me it was because the Lord desired it, that thou might'st minister to me and all our people when the cruel interdict was laid on us."

He scarcely seemed to hear. "Forgive me, Dezirada," he implored. "Have pity on the misery that tears my soul. Ten thousand times ten thousand years in Purgatory were a small price to pay if by my thoughts I've soiled thee. I was in friar's orders, and forbidden to hold converse or think of women, save as I thought of all God's creatures, yet constantly I thought on thee, not as the tenement of an immortal soul, but as a woman, one of those whom I was oath-bound to abjure. Ah, Dezirada, if my love has sullied thee——"

"No woman can be but the better for the pure love of a good man, my Andrés," she broke in gently. "Reproach thyself not, but think on heaven and its everlasting bliss——"

"Aye, heaven! 'Tis said that Doomsday comes apace, and ere another Easter morn the earth and skies shall have been rolled up like a parchment scroll. I go, Dezirada, joyfully I go to make a place for thee in heaven. Fear not to die when thy time comes, for I shall wait hard by the gate that leads from transitory life to immortality. My hand shall clasp thy hand to guide thee o'er the doorsill of the many mansions in Our Father's house. Thou shalt not feel the pangs of death, for I shall draw thee through the door to life eternal so quickly—like as a bridegroom carrieth his bride across the threshold of their

house . . . in heaven is neither marrying nor giving in marriage . . . the consecrated celibate is loosed from his vows . . . *Mater purissima* . . . Dezirada——" He struggled halfway to a sitting posture, raised his hand as if in benediction, and with her name upon his lips fell back upon the litter, his mouth a little opened, eyes fixed in the unseeing stare of the new-dead.

The Lady Dezirada halted the procession and fell upon her knees beside the stretcher, hands joined and head bowed in petition.

"Mother of Sorrows, hope of sinners, comes now a valiant soul to thee," she exclaimed. "Have thou pity on him, and on all good Christians. Amen."

"Shall we bear him to the convent, Lady?" asked a peasant. "It is not meet that one in holy orders should be buried elsewhere——"

The Lady Dezirada bowed her head in thought a moment; then: "Not so," she decided. "He transgressed discipline by coming out among us to give absolution for our sins. They would deny him rest in consecrated ground and give him a beast's burial. Let us take him to my pleasance where the wind chants benedictions in the jessamine and the rose-trees may drop benisons upon his tomb."

THEY dug the shallow grave in her garden, and as the peasants plied their spades Ellis looked about. He had an oddly eery feeling: "I have been here before; I know this place!" Beneath the star-glow the pleasance was peaceful as a dream of Eden, a garden traced with sanded paths, with here and there a deep, still pool where golden carp played roguishly among the roots of star-shaped water lilies. Against a wall of weathered brick old rose-trees shook their blossoms out like banners, and trailing jessamine climbed across the coping. A hundred yards or so away was a white-stuccoed house with red-tiled roof and a wide entranceway barred by a grille of fancifully wrought iron.

They joined Frey Andrés' hands above his breast with the crucifix from his rosary clasped in them, and at the Lady Dezirada's order crossed his feet as if he had made pilgrimage to holy places.

"Did not he die to bear the consolation of religion to the Church her suffering children?" she asked when they wondered at her command.

All knelt in silent prayer about the open grave, and as the first spadeful of earth dropped upon the body, Clairbourn rose and began singing softly. He had an excellent baritone, and more than once had eked out his allowance in his college days by singing in church choirs. Now, with all the art he possessed, he sang the *Ave* from Gounod's *Messe Solennelle*:

*"Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum,*
*Benedicta tu in mulieribus,*
*Et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus . . ."*

As he finished the first phrase the company looked up with bated breath; by the final amen every face was touched with exaltation. Born to music and a love of the beautiful, but accustomed to the simplest compositions, the Provençals were almost stunned by the sheer glory of the Gounod masterpiece. "He has been permitted to glimpse heaven, that one," whispered a peasant to him who knelt beside him. "Surely, no man wrote such music; it is the very song the blessed angels sing what time they bow in adoration at Our Lady's throne!"

HE SLEPT in a high, gilded bed with silken sheets and coverlid of quilted satin. Dog-weary, he had tumbled down to sleep without a sidelong glance at his apartment, but when an aged servitor ap-

peared at his door with the coming of the first sunbeams, he sat up, stretched luxuriously, and looked about him. The room was all of twenty paces square, with whitewashed plaster walls and ceiling and a stone floor warmed by woolen rugs barbarian in the brilliance of primary colors. There was a many-cushioned divan set against one wall; tall chairs of oak carved in the Spanish style and pillowed with red velvet stood about the others, and before an oratory was a priedieu with a leather kneeling-cushion. By the window stood a brazier of wrought iron; on a table was a copper bowl filled to overflowing with roses from the pleasance.

"Will my lord the tyrant-smiter deign to rise and follow me?" the old man asked. He made a quaint obeisance, more like a curtsy than a bow, bending both rheumatic knees at once and bobbing up and down.

"You're earlier than my valet generally comes," grinned Clairbourn, "but the customs of the house must be observed, I suppose. Lead on, MacDuff. Where to?"

The fellow put a copper bowl of steaming water on the table and laid a small dagger and a saucer filled with something which looked like thick, soured cream beside it. Then he unfolded a towel, draped it on his arm, and waited.

"My lord would shave before the bath?" he asked.

Ellis noticed that he wore a metal disk swung by a cord about his neck, and as he reached the table the servant held this up before him. It was a slightly concave sheet of polished silver, and, deftly shifted by the servitor, who seemed instinctively to know his every move beforehand, it made an excellent mirror. The creamy substance in the saucer turned out to be a sort of soft soap, rather sticky to apply, but lathering to a fine fluffy foam when rubbed into the face with the fingers, and the dagger was as keen as any razor he had ever used. In ten minutes he was shaved and ready for the next step in the toilet.

Wrapped in a cassock-like garment of white wool, his feet in rope-soled espadrilles, he followed his conductor through a corridor and down a flight of stairs until they came to a walled garden where stone lions' heads sprayed streams of water into a round marble pool. Ellis stood beneath the gushing runnels, turning around slowly, and finally dipped himself in the shallow basin of the fountain, emerging refreshed as from a shower. A pile of linen towels had been warming in the early morning sun, and the old man rubbed him vigorously, then spread sweet-smelling unguents on his hair and combed it deftly as a practised barber. This done, he led the way to a small wicket gate, bobbed his curtsy-bow, and asked, "My lord would break his fast?"

The gate led to the patio round which the house was built in Moorish fashion. A fountain played in the tiled center of the courtyard; round its edge, below the overhanging balcony, stood orange and lemon trees in tall tubs of painted wood. The Lady Dezirada waited for him in the shade of one of these.

Like Clairbourn she was dressed in a white woolen overall, full-fashioned as an Arab's burnoose and belted at the waist with a wide leathern girdle set with flat gold bosses. He had been right about her hair. It was unbraided and unbound, and the tips of it trailed on the marble pavement round her ivory-inlaid chair. She looked up at his coming and he heard the tinkle of small silver bells. Involuntarily he glanced down. Her child-small pink and white feet had been shod with rope-soled peasant sandals, and fastened to their cross-straps were the silver sleighbells to whose shrilling music she moved everywhere. Clairbourn's breath almost stopped at the sight of her. Sitting as she was, and costumed thus, she was the perfect

pattern of a mediæval saint. Thus, since Titian and da Vinci, had the greatest painters pictured saints and angels. Only wings, and possibly a halo, were lacking, and the sunlight on her bright gold hair supplied this, for it was like an aureole of flame around her pale and lovely face.

She laid her hand in his and met his eyes with a grave, almost wondering, look. Her touch was timid, she seemed almost frightened of him, yet at contact with her fingers he felt a sharp thrill, distinct as an electric shock. It seemed that he could feel his pulses quicken; there was a slight sensation of dizziness as he bent and raised her hand to his lips.

"Welcome to this house of mine, my lord," her voice was scarcely louder than a whisper. "It and all things in it are at thy command."

"Thank you," he returned inadequately as he dropped in the chair across the table from her. Then for a time they looked at each other in silence. It did not seem appropriate to ask how she had slept. To comment on the weather was too banal. For the first time since his fourteenth year Clairbourn Ellis was tongued-tied before a woman. And all the while she looked at him with grave and steady eyes, studying him, seeming to compare him with some preconceived design. At length she broke the pause:

"Art—art thou truly he?" There was something more than mere tentativeness in the query. It seemed as if her whole life hinged on his reply.

"I certainly am me," he evaded with no more tact than grammatical exactness, "but if you'll tell me who 'he' is perhaps I'll be able to tell you more."

"Dost thou by any chance remember me?" she asked him tremulously.

What could he say? Could he tell this girl who seemed no more than half his age that he remembered her from nursery days? Or that she was just a character from Mother Goose? No chance! Yet if he told her "No" he knew the disappointment would be heart-breaking.

"Lady, in my own land I am a painter," he replied. "Sometimes I paint from living models, sometimes my fancies guide my brush. Meseems I have beheld thy face in visions, or dreamed it in a dream. I know that I have limned thy likeness in a picture celebrating Eastertide."

Relief dawned in her steadfast hyacinthine eyes. The latent fear and doubt that lurked in them seemed drained away, like a wave that slides off a bright beach and leaves it calm and shining in the sun.

"I too remember thee—but as an infant," she affirmed. "Whether it were dream or vision I know not, but methought I wakened in the night to hear the frightened wailing of a little child, and something in my heart entreated that I rise and dress and do the harness on my horse and go to bear him comfort. I rode great distances upon the quest; through far, dark skies I seemed to ride as though I mounted Pegasus and not mine own true palfrey; I heard the music of the spheres and saw strange, terrifying sights — of men who battled in the vaulted heavens as they had been eagles, or bored beneath the surface of the vasty deep like Leviathan — but finally I came unto a house, and there in darkness lay a little lad sore frighted by a host of evil shapes that ringed him round about. But I was not feared of them; so I went to him and soothed him till he slept, and then I came away to mine own place again. How comes it that I dreamt this dream? In sooth, I know not. Only this I know, for it was given to me to know it: Man-grown, the lad I comforted should bring help to fair Provence, and joy unspeakable to me; though through him I might also find my death."

"But I am twice thy age, milady," he protested. "How could it be thou sawest me as a lad?"

She raised her narrow shoulders in a graceful shrug. "With dreams as with the good God all is possible," she answered, smiling.

Then the serving-maids brought breakfast: white bread and fine, clear, amber-tinted wine with the smell of leaves and grape-flowers in it, and oranges and nectarines, apples and pomegranates, and soft, full-ripened, luscious figs.

HE FOUND a suit of fresh apparel in his room when he repaired there after breakfast: a shirt of fine white linen, hose of brown silk, leathern shoon, and a slashed doublet of brown satin laced with gold-tipped points; last of all a closely-fitting silk cap with a heron's quill thrust in its crown. When he descended to the patio, feeling as if he were going to a masquerade, he found the Lady Dezirada waiting.

She had changed her woolen bathrobe for a morning gown of white linen with full-hanging sleeves and short enough to show the tips of her kid bootees, fashioned with long, upturned tips to each of which was fixed a little bell. Her hair was gathered in a net of silver cord and covered with a veil of Roman-striped silk tissue. In her hand she held a sheathed sword.

"Thou art weaponless, my lord Clairbourn," she greeted, "and though thou workest mighty havoc with thy bare hands, meseemeth it were better if thou hadst a sword. Take it and wield it valiantly in Freedom's cause. It was my grandsire's, brought by him from Damasco in *outremer* when he came back from warring with the Paynim. See, it bears his shibboleth upon it." She bared the blade and pointed to a legend rather crudely scratched upon the metal: *"Non sibi, sed alteribus."*

"Not for ourselves, but for others?" he translated tentatively as she put the gleaming weapon in his hand.

"Yea, it is the motto of our house. There be those who love their fellow men through God, and those who love their God through fellow man. To me it always seemed that is the better way."

He swung the weapon tentatively, fell into a reprise and tried a practise lunge. Had the sword been weighed and measured for him it could not have been more perfect. The blade was a yard's span from tip to hilt, rather wider than a modern weapon, and prolonged to go clear through the ivory handle, which was bolted to it like the handles of old-fashioned kitchen knives. There were neither quillions, knuckle bows nor *pas-d'anes*, merely a hand-guard shaped like an inverted D, wrought brass wrapped with silver wire. Its double edge was razor-sharp, and it had a wonderfully balanced feel in his hand.

A LITTLE breathing-spell of peace came to the countryside with Clairbourn's advent. Sebastian de Longos had been de Montfort's chief lieutenant in the district, and with his death, raids became less frequent. There was no systematic pillaging, and such murders as there were were principally for private gain or private vengeance. Simon de Montfort stayed at Carcassonne, collecting the rich spoil of the crushed territory, assessing fines and levies, planning fresh forays.

Ellis rode out on patrol occasionally, and when he and his guerrillas met the enemy the fight was short and sharp, and ended with the hanging of survivors to the nearest tree bough. So frequent and successful were his counter-raids that presently the soldiers withdrew to Carcassonne. This was only April, by midsummer Count Simon would send out an army and grind these stiff-necked rebels' faces in the dust for once and all. Until then . . . there was plenitude of wine—and wenches—in the city; who but a fool would fight with foemen who struck and disappeared, then struck again when least expected, when he

might get comfortably drunk with safety in garrison?

So Ellis spent more and more time at the Lady Dezirada's villa, and their intimacy ripened with each sun-warmed day.

Early he asked her why she always went bell-footed.

"It is a vow," she told him. "Until fair Provence has been freed from the oppression of the North I've vowed to go belled like a jongleur or bouffon. For four years now I've heard the bells remind me of my country's travail every waking moment, but meseems the time draws nigh when I may lay my chimes aside and walk like other women."

One morning as they rose from breakfast he asked her to remain while he made a sketch of her. Next day he procured some brushes and pigments and began her portrait, using a slab of bleached olive wood in lieu of ivory or canvas. He painted her as she came from the bath, her white wool robe girt with the gold-bossed leathern belt, her bright hair swirling like a cataract of cloven flame across her brow and shoulders and rippling to the pavement round her chair, her little feet in rope-soled sandals with the small bells fastened to their straps. When he finished painting he inscribed the picture *"La Domna de las Campanas*—The Lady of the Bells."

"Nay, like Pilate, 'what I have written I have written'," he told her when she protested. "In years to come thy effigy shall hang above an altar-place, and generations of the sons and daughters of thy Provence shall make prayer and thanksgiving to her who helped to free their country from oppression."

Word came a raiding-party had been ravaging the countryside, and Clairbourn gathered his guerrillas and rode out to meet them. For three days they pursued the trail of burned farmsteads and cottages, mutilated corpses and dead animals; finally they made contact with the ravagers. There was an even hundred of them, pikemen, bowmen, and arbalestiers. The guerrillas numbered almost twice as many, with reinforcements pouring in from every farm and hamlet, croft and grange, but, except for Clairbourn, none of them had armor, and their weapons were of rude and home-made kinds — axes, pitchforks, flails, scythe-blade pikes, butchering-knives, a few swords and some crudely-fashioned bows.

And slings! Rawhide for their making was available in any quantities, stones were to be had for stooping, and the peasants had been practised in their use since infancy.

When de Montfort's soldiers saw the pitiful array of Clairbourn's force they laughed until the tears—which had not come at groans of men who died by torment or screams of frantic women as they saw their children's brains dashed out—ran down their grizzled cheeks and splashed upon the bosses of their breastplates. Then they formed in phalanx to march through the rabble.

Ellis threw a skirmish line before the pike-edged, shield-protected square of marching men-at-arms. These retreated steadily, bawling execrations, brandishing their weapons and occasionally discharging ineffectual arrows at the soldiers. Now and then a bowman or arbalestier answered with a clothyard shaft or crossbow bolt, and when he did a peasant fell to twitch and bleed his life away; for they were marksmen, these de Montfort veterans, and no better men of war were to be found in Europe or the Isles. But while the skirmishers drew arrows and attention from the phalanx, the remainder of Clairbourn's guerrillas circled through the olive groves and wheat fields till they encompassed the soldiers at rear and flank. Then Ellis blew his bugle-horn, and at the signal slingers loosed their missiles, raining

flints upon the close-packed men-at-arms like hailstones on a field of standing corn.

Most of the stones glanced harmlessly from iron cap and brazen gorget, or fell clanging from the metal bosses of the ox-hide targets, but now and then one found flesh, splitting nose or cheek, or striking blindness to an eye. On and on they rained, continuous and innumerable as drops in an autumnal tempest. Here and there a man-at-arms fell stumbling to his knees, or dropped to rise no more. The captain of the troop leapt half his height in air with upflung arms, then crashed face-forward on the stone tiles of the ancient Roman road with a sling-stone in his brain. Blinded by a sharp flint a sergeant tottered groping from the ranks, and the man who marched at his elbow staggered back into the arms of his companions, his face a bloody ruin where an eight-ounce stone had crushed his lips against his shattered teeth.

Two or three times the column was halted while the bowmen and the arbalestiers sought to clear the way with shafts and quarrels, but the slingers fell upon their faces when the weapons were discharged, lying prone until the ranks were dressed again; then, when the march resumed, they rose and hurled a fresh downpour of missiles.

For five miles by the *miliaria* which still marked the old Roman road the running fight continued, and the men-at-arms no longer laughed in derision at Clairbourn's peasants. They had left a third of their companions writhing in the highway dust, almost all of them were wounded, and the galling rain of stones continued steadily, continuously, murderously. The sergeant in command ordered a halt, dressed his ranks and prepared for a charge. Where barbs and bolts could not reach, cold steel would. The pestilential peasants should be cut down in their tracks. The clarion sounded and the phalanx broke, sunlight glinting on the pikes and striking back bright flashes from the flourished swords.

Now they were fighting man to man, and though the better arms and armor of the soldiers gave them an advantage, the preponderant numbers and the fury of the boors more than overbalanced it. Quarter was a word unknown to both sides. When a man struck down his adversary he dispatched him with as slight compunction as he would have had in crushing life out of a wounded snake. Kill or be killed was the order of the conflict. In half an hour it was over, and Clairbourne's men were busily engaged in stripping armor—and such valuables as they could find—from the corpses of their late antagonists.

Shallow graves were scooped out for the fallen peasants. The kites and ravens could be trusted to provide sepulcher for the dead soldiers—they had expected nothing more, and would have done the same to the peasants had they been victors. Then the guerrillas dispersed, each man going to his home, and Ellis turned his horse toward Dezirada's villa.

Half a league from the house he was hailed by Estefanette, the young girl he'd met on Gallows Hill the night he came to Provence.

"Dom Clairbourn, *beau sire,* haste thee to the rescue!" she cried wildly. "It is the Lady Dezirada—they have taken her!"

"Eh? Who has taken her, and where, Fanette?" he asked.

"To the citadel at Beziers, milord. She is arrested on a charge of witchcraft and sedition."

IN THE *majoria*—the great hall of justice—sat the judges temporal and spiritual; for the heinous crimes of which she stood accused concerned both crown and crozier.

A clerk read her indictment: That on divers times, at divers places, she had consorted with the contumacious rebels who defied both King and Bishop; that

she gave them shelter, fed them, clothed them, helped them to escape arrest.

So much for temporal offenses. Spiritually the list was longer and more formidable. She was a known associate of proscribed heretics; by her devilish arts she had seduced the friar Andrés from his vows of chastity, and induced him to confess and absolve persons under interdict. By the dying declaration of one Jacques Floquet, left for dead when he was set upon by rebel peasants, but happily found by a band of loyal troops whose officer had reduced his statement to writing, she had raised a demon from the depths of hell to beat the valiant Captain Sebastian to death with his bare hands, and ere he vanished in a cloud of sulfurous smoke this selfsame imp had vaunted his diablerie and called attention to the fire which blazed from his garments. Men—and women—had been burned on proof of far less serious charges. Would she confess her error, declare penitence, and trust herself to the court's mercy?

She denied the charges, stem and branch. Never had she raised her hand against the forces of the crown with knowledge. If men came pillaging and burning, slaying all who crossed their path, helpless babe and infirm grandsire no less than the stalwart men who stood against them, and showed no warrant for their violence, how could she know them for the soldiers of the King? They acted as if they had been common robbers. Could they blame her for assuming that they were?

As for the charge of sorcery, it was a lie from start to finish. Should she be convicted on the rantings of a man who raved in the delirium of coming death? She and all her house were known to be good Christians.

Turning from the churchmen to the lay judges she asked pointedly if they would let the vaporing of a madman, and a common man-at-arms at that, forfeit the life of one in whose veins ran the noblest blood of France and Provence.

When she mentioned Frey Andrés tears coursed down her cheeks. He was a godly, pious man, who never by a thought or word or deed transgressed his vows. If he had given absolution to the interdicted Provençals it was because they were his people and he loved them, and his gentle heart was touched at their sad plight.

The Bishop's surrogate turned to the president of the court. "Need we go further with this phase of the examination, *Messire?*" he asked. "The prisoner is obdurate, but there is no question of the charge of witchcraft. The boot, the rack, perhaps the little horse——"

"Thou sayest, good Monsignor," interrupted the court president. "There is no question of the charge of witchcraft——"

"Good. Then thou wilt order the tormenters to begin——"

"Not so. The wench hath given proof past peradventure that she is no witch."

The surrogate drew a quick breath . . . these sharp-eyed laymen . . . "How meanest thou, *Messire?*"

"Why, by her tears. How else? Certes, one as learned as thy most reverend self knows that a witch hath not the power to weep, for she forfeits it when she accepts the Devil as her lord and signs her pact with Barran-Sathanas. But meseems we have not finished with this matter of disloyalty.

"Dost thou still deny the charges, Lady Dezirada?" he asked her sternly. " 'Twere better to speak now, and plainly. Knowest not we can compel thy speech by torment if thou provest contumacious?"

Dezirada swept the courtroom with a quick glance. In the forefront of the audience she saw Clairbourn with his long sword girt against his thigh.

"Nay, marry, that thou canst not, *Messire,*" she denied. "I be of noble lineage, and my privileges are absolute. If

I deny thy accusations I may have recourse to heaven to prove mine innocence. I demand my right to have the cause adjudged by ordeal by battle."

"How now?" the president replied. "Thow knowest women and ecclesiastics may not wage combat——"

"But if I have a champion——"

"Why, soothly, in such a case the court can but assent, *Madomna.*" He looked about the crowded courtroom. "Durst any man espouse this woman's cause?"

"Aye, by the rood, that do I!" Clairbourn advanced to the bancal and stood beside Dezirada, tugging at his gauntlet. "Hear ye, knights and gentles all," he shouted, "I do take on myself this lady's cause, and whoso dares dispute her innocence I'll write the judgment of high heaven on him with my sword. And thus I pledge my gage." He flung his gauntlet to the courtroom floor and bared his blade as he completed the formula: "Pick it up who lists!"

THEY lodged her in a little cell-like room adjoining a small chapel dedicated to the Magdalen, a darksome and forbidding little shrine with vaulted ceiling and a window scarce a hand-breadth wide, stained, rather than illumined, by the red glow of a vigil lamp. Here, while a sergeant paced before the iron-bound oak door, they let him see her for a moment.

She stood still and silent as the painted saint above the altar as he came to her, her fairness outlined by the dull glow of the sacral light. Her eyes were wide, moist, starry, and her lips were trembling like a little child's. Fear had laid its icy grip on her, but it was not fear of death. Then she held her long, pearl-pale hands out to him, and suddenly they were in each other's arms. It was not so much a passionate embrace as an instinctive act, so natural, so tender, so utterly inevitable that the quiet ecstasy of it was almost terrifying. Then presently she found her voice and named him her true knight, her lord, her lover and the master of her heart. And he gave her such praise as lovers have paid to the mistresses of their hearts since Adam first beheld the bride the Lord God gave him in the garden He had digged and planted, calling her his dear, his darling, his beloved, fairest among women, delight of his eyes and the jewel of his heart.

Then the sergeant hammered on the door to tell them that their time of tryst was sped, and he took leave of her sweet mouth and turned to answer the summons. For a moment, as the door swung shut, he glanced back. She was kneeling on the bare stone of the altar steps, hands outstretched toward him; her violet eyes were bright with trust and worship.

THE ring of combat was marked out by stones laid in a circle in the castle's base court, and the president of the tribunal with his associates and attendants took their seats upon the raised dais.

"Who sustains the charge against the Lady Dezirada de la Soleza?" asked the president, and a herculean varlet swaggered forward, raised his hand in salute, and drew Clairbourn's glove from his belt, tossing it into the courtyard dust contemptuously.

"Who is he?" asked Ellis of a man-at-arms who leant upon his pike, bored by the whole proceeding, to judge by his attitude.

"Messer Miguel Torres, champion of the Convent of Saint Lazare, and sometime champion of the Lord Bishop," returned the soldier. "Knowest thou thy paternosters, little one?"

"How sayest thou?"

"If thou hast a prayer to say, thou hadst best be saying it; there'll be small time for making peace with heaven once thou'rt in the ring with that one. Ten years and

more he's held the list for the Lord Bishop and the convent, and never has he lost a battle-wager for them. *Mo' Dio,* I have seen him chop a sword in half as if it were a wooden billet!"

Ellis noticed that the champion was unarmed and wondered at it, but explanation came when a man in the black robe of an exorcist appeared with two huge glaives in his arms and strode into the center of the ring. "Yonder is the armiger, little one," the pikeman told him. "Step forth and choose thy brand, and may good fortune attend thee. Thou'lt need it."

"Nay, I am already weaponed." Clairbourn protested, but the exorcist gave him a cold smile.

" 'Twas thyself who threw the gage," he reminded. "He who takes it up may choose the arms. Lay by thy sword and make thy choice of one of these."

The weapons were of clumsy design, long-handled for two-handed grasping, cross-hilted, with blades at least two inches wide and all of forty inches long. They must have weighed twelve pounds apiece, and except for hacking would be almost useless, for their weight made using them with fencing-skill impossible. All advantage lay with the gigantic champion, Ellis realized at a glance. Armed with such a weapon and with a veritable ogre for an opponent, he would be virtually defenseless. "I have seen him chop a sword in two as it had been a wooden billet," the man-at-arms had said, and the words kept echoing in his ears.

"Eeenie, meenie, minie, mo," he counted like a child, closing his eyes and touching the sword-hilts alternately. At the final count he put his hand upon the nearest hilt, but the exorcist deftly moved the blades so the other one came uppermost. So—they were forcing the choice on him, eh?

"Let me try its heft," he demanded, taking up the heavy weapon and swinging it above his head, then whipping it as if it were a fishing-pole and he had just completed a long cast.

The iron snapped like shattering glass and more than half the blade fell clanking on the pavement at his feet. What remained in Ellis' hands bore eloquent testimony. The blade had been cut with a file till it was almost paper-thin; then the filings had been stuck back in the file-kerf with oil and gum.

Clairbourn held the mutilated weapon up for all to see. "Behold, my lords and captains," he shouted, "what depths of perfidy they sink to. In the name of chivalry and on behalf of every champion this dastard hath defeated in the lists I name him murderer and scoundrel, and unfit to meet in combat with a man of honor.

"What knowest thou of this, sir shavepate?" he demanded of the exorcist.

The man returned his gaze with cold and sullen hatred, but answered nothing.

Not so the president of the court. White with rage, he rose from his seat, motioning to his heralds.

"Tie me that scurvy knave," he ordered, pointing to the exorcist, "and lead him haltered like an ass outside the castle doors; then beat him through the streets and from the city gate. As for thee, Dom Miguel, you have a single choice: Fight with such weapon as your adversary in his chivalry may choose to grant thee, though it be no more than a broomstick, or have your right hand cut off and hung round your neck while you stand in the marketplace for fools to gape at."

"Give him thy sword," Ellis bade a man-at-arms; then, as Miguel stepped into the ring, *"En garde,* thou caitiff knave, and if thou hast a hope of mercy put the hope aside, for blood of men perfidiously slain cries from these stones for vengeance!"

But, swaggering bully and unconscionable cheat though he might be, Miguel was a skilled hand with the sword. His straight

blade was longer by a hand than Clairbourn's curved saber, and to his sword's length he added full four inches of arm-reach. A dozen times he struck his point on Ellis' breastplate while all of Ellis' blows fell short. He had prodigious strength, too; so by sheer force he almost chopped the weapon out of Clairbourn's hand time after time.

There were no rounds. They were to fight till one or the other of them fell, and Clairbourn's breath was coming in short panting jerks and in his wrist there was the pain of coming weakness. A searing pain stung in his cheek as his adversary's point reached him, and he fell back a pace, another and another, seeking breathing-time.

Then Miguel overreached himself. His warped mind, seemingly unable to endure the thought of honorable victory, prodded him to needless treachery, and from his boot-top he drew a dirk, tossed it, caught it as it fell and hurled it full in Ellis' face.

Clairbourn dodged the missile, slipped upon the pavement and fell sprawling to his knees. And as he fell, his sword jerked up, and the razor-edge of his blade pierced the inner side of Miguel's leg, severing the femoral artery as a knife might slit a wine-skin.

"A chirurgeon—go, some of you, and fetch a chirurgeon, before he bleeds to death!" the Bishop's surrogate commanded.

"At his peril let the sawbones set foot in the ring!" Ellis warned with upraised sword. "Did chirurgeons attend the men this villain did to death by treachery and weakened weapons?"

The surrogate bowed frigidly. "Thou callest check, Sire Clairbourn," he answered, "but the game is never finished until checkmate is called. There be those who would inquire of thy origin and country, thy faithfulness to holy doctrine, and how it came thou wert at hand to lend thy sword to one accused—and not acquitted—of the practise of witchcraft."

Ellis grinned at him. "I'll be ready any time you or your gangsters want to play," he replied, "and so will this."

The surrogate drew back in haste as Clairbourn's sword cut through the air six inches from his nose.

SHE was kneeling on the altar steps when he came to the little chapel. Her head was held a little back; fringed lids were drooped on plumbless violet eyes, almost concealing them; the full, red lips were slightly parted in beatitude; the whole face in its frame of gilded hair was entranced, longing. He heard her, though her prayer was but a whisper: *"O Magdalena santissima,* you too have suffered; you too knew what it was to give yourself in love. Hear my prayer, Maria Magdalena! Grant him victory, and bring him safely back to me. . . ."

The sound of her prayer faded like the music of a radio when the rheostat is turned off slowly. She was moving rapidly away, retreating and diminishing, as objects lose their size but not their clarity when looked at through reversed binoculars. Now, so far away she seemed to be beyond the reach of his voice, it was as if she wavered momentarily, like the image in a swinging mirror or the reflection in a still pool into which a stone is dropped. Only she and the saint seemed to hold their form and outline; the background was obscured and cloudy; then, suddenly, it was no longer the small, gloomy chapel, but a garden traced with sanded paths, with here and there a deep, still pool where golden carp played roguishly among the roots of star-shaped water lilies. Against a wall of weathered brick, old rose-trees shook their blossoms out like banners in the calm still air of gathering evening, and trailing jessamine climbed across the coping.

He was in the Poplar Street studio, sprawling in an armchair, looking at the picture he had painted. An echo seemed to hang in the still air like the faint hum that succeeds the striking of a sonorous gong. His own voice? Had he called her name as she retreated into . . . dear Heaven, into *what* had she retreated, time, space, or eternity? He propped his elbows on his knees and cupped his face in his hands.

Slowly, very slowly, reality replaced glamor. He looked down at the empty tumbler and the empty whisky bottle, saw the snow that piled like layers of cotton wool against the skylight, softening the cold, gray light of sunless dawn.

"Boy, what a dream that was!" he told himself. "I've seen the fine lady on the white horse with bells on her toes. . . ." But had it been a dream? Had Dezirada, whom he'd held against his heart and kissed, for whom he'd fought, whom he had loved, been nothing but a dream? A couplet from *The Tempest* echoed in his mind:

"We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep."

"NOW that's what I call class, boy," old Sam Gulden chuckled when Ellis brought his picture in. "I knew you'd ring th' bell for me. Sure, that there card'll be on every high-class stand from New York to Hollywood; and will it be a winner? Don't ask me, I wouldn't tell you! It's goin' to be th' hottest seller we've put out since th' dee-pression! Stop by Miss Simon's office on th' way out, Ellis boy; she's got a nize check for you."

Ellis cashed the check, paid a few bills, bought himself a man's-sized lunch at Longchamps, stopped by the Astor bar for a few drinks and some gossip, then took the B.M.T. to Brooklyn.

A bulky packet with a row of French stamps reaching almost clear across its upper margin had been stuffed into his mailbox; and as he took it out he recognized the writing on it as Dick Hope's. Dick was taking a sabbatical year from New York, poking through the less-known galleries in France with camera and sketchbook, preliminary work for the murals he was going to do for the Middleborough Public Library.

"Dear Clair" [he wrote]: "If you're still interested in mediæval art there's one that ought to interest you in the Musée des Antiques at Beziers. There's no doubt about its authenticity, but if it weren't so well vouched for I'd swear some modern slipped one over on the faculty of the gallery, for the treatment is as up to date as Whistler's or Sargent's. Actually, old-timer, it reminds me of your better work.

"They're rather vague about the gal who sat for it, but it seems she had a tragic history; got mixed up in the Albigensian persecutions on the wrong side of the fence, and was arrested on a charge of heresy and witchcraft. Instead of pleading guilty and saving her skin—at the expense of forfeiture of all her property, of course—she chose to face it out and demanded that her guilt or innocence be left to ordeal by battle. Everything went well for her at first, and her champion polished off the bruiser for the prosecution in fine style. Then he disappeared. Vanished into thin air, as the feller says.

"After that, of course, the fat was in the fire, and so was she. It seems the man who fought for her was previously unknown around these parts and when he won his scrap and did a disappearing act the natural verdict was that he was one of Old Nick's boys who'd gone AWOL from hell just long enough to slap the champion of right and justice down, then report back to the fireside at Gehenna before his absence could be noted. Anyway, they burned the lady to a fine crisp in the citadel courtyard, after several hours of the usual

unpleasant preliminaries with the rack and thumbscrews.

"Personally, I think her 'demon lover' was just an ordinary heel who saw the way the wind was blowing and took it on the lam before he got his whiskers singed, leaving her to hold the bag.

"Through the kindness of M. d'Hyères I was able to photograph the portrait. Look it over, son, and tell me if it doesn't look as if you might have done it some day when you were in 'specially fine form. One thing acquits you, though. You're versatile, but you couldn't possibly have been in southern France in the year of grace 1212."

Ellis drew the photograph from the letter with unsteady fingers. He hardly dared to look at it, yet he dared not throw it in the fire unseen.

The woman in the picture wore a long loose robe of white wool girt with a gold-bossed leathern belt. Her hair, unbound and unplaited, swirled like a cataract of cloven flame across her brow and down her shoulders, rippling to the pavement round her ivory-inlaid chair. Her child-small feet were shod with rope-soled sandals, with small bells fastened to their straps. And her eyes followed him with continuing insistence, accusingly, reproachfully.

He began to laugh, softly at first, then louder—higher. . . . "You're right, Dick; sure, you're right," he gasped between spasmodic bursts of irresistible cachinnation. "I certainly could not have been in southern France in the year of grace 1212!"

*Coming soon—*

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# In the Walls of Eryx

By KENNETH STERLING & H. P. LOVECRAFT

*A strange and unusual novelette of an invisible maze on the Planet Venus, and of two men from our own planet who were trapped therein*

BEFORE I try to rest I will set down these notes in preparation for the report I must make. What I have found is so singular, and so contrary to all past experience and expectations, that it deserves a very careful description.

I reached the main landing on Venus March 18, terrestrial time; VI-9 of the planet's calendar. Being put in the main group under Miller, I received my equipment—watch tuned to Venus's slightly quicker rotation—and went through the usual mask drill. After two days I was pronounced fit for duty.

Leaving the Crystal Company's post at Terra Nova around dawn, VI-12, I followed the southerly route which Anderson had mapped out from the air. The going was bad, for these jungles are always half impassable after a rain. It must be the moisture that gives the tangled vines and creepers that leathery toughness; a toughness so great that a knife has to work ten minutes on some of them. By noon it was dryer—the vegetation getting soft and rubbery so that the knife went through it easily, but even then I could not make much speed. These Carter oxygen masks are too heavy—just carrying one half wears an ordinary man out. A Dubois mask with sponge-reservoir instead of tubes would give just as good air at half the weight.

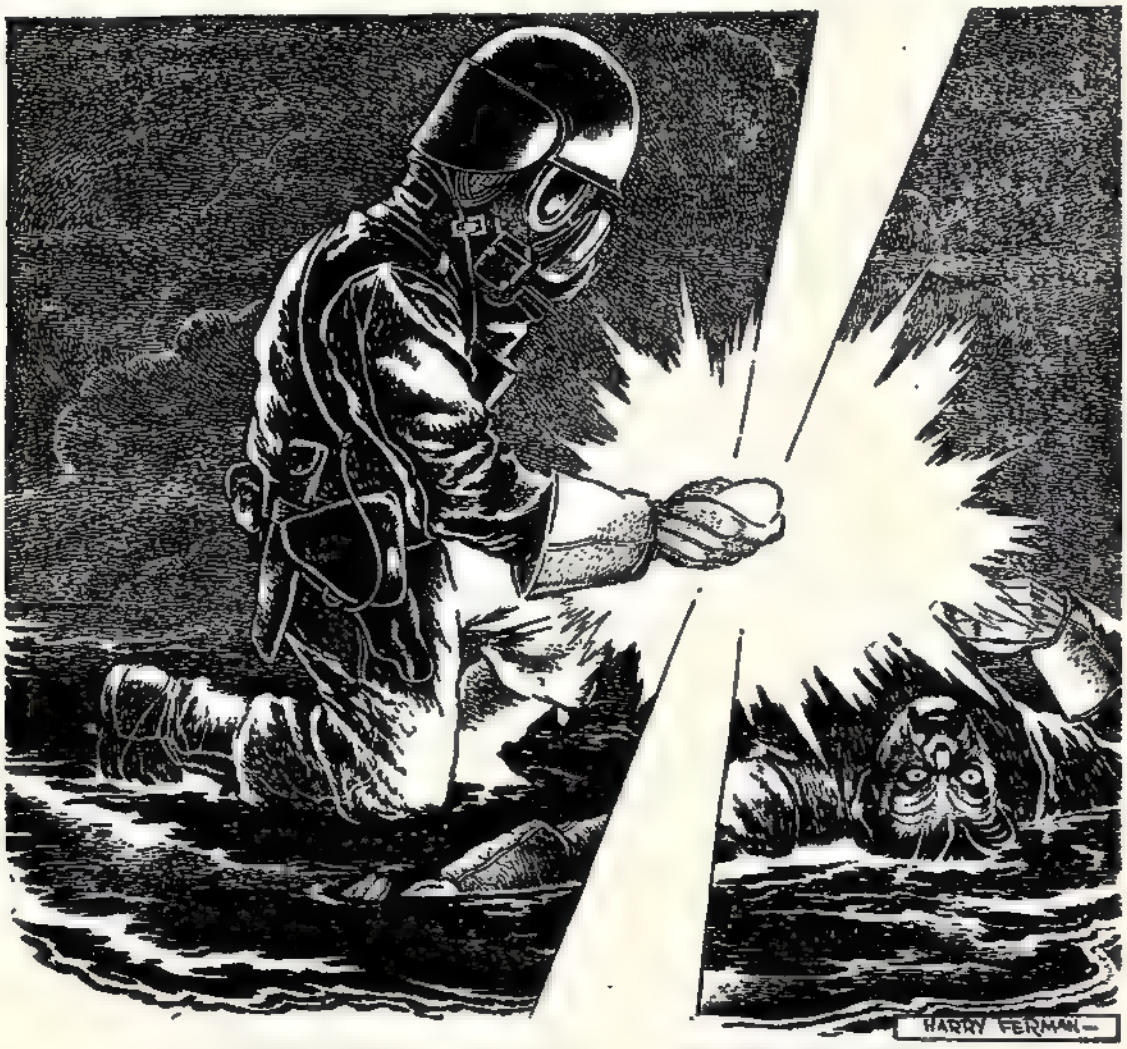
The crystal detector seemed to function well, pointing steadily in a direction verifying Anderson's report. It is curious how that principle of affinity works, without any of the fakery of the old divining-rods back home. There must be a great deposit of crystals within a thousand miles, though I suppose those damnable man-lizards always watch and guard it. Possibly they think we are just as foolish for coming to Venus to hunt the stuff as we think they are for groveling in the mud whenever they see a piece of it, or for keeping the great mass on a pedestal in their temple.

I wish they'd get a new religion, for they have no use for the crystals except to pray to them. Barring theology, they would let us take all we want; and even if they learned to tap them for power there'd be more than enough for their planet and the earth besides. I for one am tired of passing up the main deposits and merely seeking separate crystals out of jungle river-beds. Sometime I'll urge the wiping out of these scaly beggars by a good stiff army from home. About twenty ships could bring enough troops across to turn the trick. One can't call the damned things men, for all their "cities" and towers. They haven't any skill except building—and using swords and poison darts—and I don't believe their so-called "cities" mean much more than ant-hills or beaver-dams. I doubt if they even have a real language—all the talk about psychological communication through those tentacles down their chests strikes me as bunk. What misleads people is their upright posture; just an accidental physical resemblance to terrestrial man.

I'd like to go through a Venus jungle for once without having to watch out for

skulking groups of them or dodge their cursed darts. They may have been all right before we began to take the crystals, but they're certainly a bad enough nuisance now, with their dart-shooting and their cutting of our water pipes. More and more I come to believe that they have a special sense like our crystal detectors. No one ever knew them to bother a man—apart from long-distance sniping—who didn't have crystals on him.

Around 1 p.m. a dart nearly took my helmet off, and I thought for a second one of my oxygen tubes was punctured. The sly devils hadn't made a sound, but three of them were closing in on me. I got them all by sweeping in a circle with my flame-pistol, for even though their color blended with the jungle, I could spot the moving creepers. One of them was fully eight feet tall, with a snout like a tapir's. The other two were average seven-footers. All that makes them hold their own is sheer numbers—even a single regiment of flame-gunners could raise hell with them. It is curious, though, how they've come to be dominant on the planet. Not another living thing higher than the wrig-




**"As he touched the gleaming surface he shuddered involuntarily."**

gling akmans and skorahs, or the flying tukahs of the other continent—unless of course those holes in the Dionæan Plateau hide something.

ABOUT two o'clock my detector veered westward, indicating isolated crystals ahead on the right. This checked up with Anderson, and I turned my course accordingly. It was harder going—not only because the ground was rising, but because the animal life and carnivorous plants were thicker. I was always slashing ugrats and stepping on skorahs, and my leather suit was all speckled from the bursting darohs which struck it from all sides. The sunlight was all the worse because of the mist, and did not seem to dry up the mud in the least. Every time I stepped my feet sank down five or six inches, and there was a sucking sort of *blup* every time I pulled them out. I wish somebody would invent a safe kind of suiting other than leather for this climate. Cloth of course would rot; but some thin metallic tissue that couldn't tear—like the surface of this revolving decay-proof record scroll—ought to be feasible sometime.

I ate about 3:30, if slipping these wretched food tablets through my mask can be called eating. Soon after that I noticed a decided change in the landscape—the bright, poisonous-looking flowers shifting in color and getting wraith-like. The outlines of everything shimmered rhythmically, and bright points of light appeared and danced in the same slow, steady tempo. After that the temperature seemed to fluctuate in unison with a peculiar rhythmic drumming.

The whole universe seemed to be throbbing in deep, regular pulsations that filled every corner of space and flowed through my body and mind alike. I lost all sense of equilibrium and staggered dizzily, nor did it change things in the least when I shut my eyes and covered my ears with my hands. However, my mind was still clear, and in a very few minutes I realized what had happened.

I had encountered at last one of those curious *mirage-plants* about which so many of our men told stories. Anderson had warned me of them, and described their appearance very closely—the shaggy stalk, the spiky leaves, and the mottled blossoms whose gaseous, dream-breeding exhalations penetrate every existing make of mask.

Recalling what happened to Bailey three years ago, I fell into a momentary panic, and began to dash and stagger about in the crazy, chaotic world which the plant's exhalations had woven around me. Then good sense came back, and I realized all I need do was retreat from the dangerous blossoms, heading away from the source of the pulsations and cutting a path blindly, regardless of what might seem to swirl around me, until safely out of the plant's effective radius.

Although everything was spinning perilously, I tried to start in the right direction and hack my way ahead. My route must have been far from straight, for it seemed hours before I was free of the mirage-plant's pervasive influence. Gradually the dancing lights began to disappear, and the shimmering spectral scenery began to assume the aspect of solidity. When I did get wholly clear I looked at my watch and was astonished to find that the time was only 4:20. Though eternities had seemed to pass, the whole experience could have consumed little more than a half-hour.

Every delay, however, was irksome, and I had lost ground in my retreat from the plant. I now pushed ahead in the uphill direction indicated by the crystal detector, bending every energy toward making better time. The jungle was still thick, though there was less animal life. Once a carnivorous blossom engulfed my right foot and held it so tightly that I had to hack it

free with my knife, reducing the flower to strips before it let go.

In less than an hour I saw that the jungle growths were thinning out, and by five o'clock, after passing through a belt of tree-ferns with very little underbrush, I emerged on a broad mossy plateau. My progress now became rapid, and I saw by the wavering of my detector-needle that I was getting relatively close to the crystal I sought. This was odd, for most of the scattered, egg-like spheroids occurred in jungle streams of a sort not likely to be found on this treeless upland.

The terrain sloped upward, ending in a definite crest. I reached the top about 5:30, and saw ahead of me a very extensive plain with forests in the distance. This, without question, was the plateau mapped by Matsugawa from the air fifty years ago, and called on our maps "Eryx" or the "Erycinian Highland." But what made my heart leap was a smaller detail, whose position could not have been far from the plain's exact center. It was a single point of light, blazing through the mist and seeming to draw a piercing, concentrated luminescence from the yellowish, vapor-dulled sunbeams. This, without doubt, was the crystal I sought—a thing possibly no larger than a hen's egg, yet containing enough power to keep a city warm for a year. I could hardly wonder, as I glimpsed the distant glow, that those miserable man-lizards worship such crystals. And yet they have not the least notion of the powers they contain.

Breaking into a rapid run, I tried to reach the unexpected prize as soon as possible; and was annoyed when the firm moss gave place to a thin, singularly detestable mud studded with occasional patches of weeds and creepers. But I splashed on heedlessly, scarcely thinking to look around for any of the skulking man-lizards. In this open space I was not very likely to be waylaid. As I advanced, the light ahead seemed to grow in size and brilliancy, and I began to notice some peculiarity in its situation. Clearly, this was a crystal of the very finest quality, and my elation grew with every spattering step.

IT IS now that I must begin to be careful in making my report, since what I shall henceforward have to say involves unprecedented—though fortunately verifiable—matters. I was racing ahead with mounting eagerness, and had come within a hundred yards or so of the crystal—whose position on a sort of raised place in the omnipresent slime seemed very odd—when a sudden, overpowering force struck my chest and the knuckles of my clenched fists and knocked me over backward into the mud. The splash of my fall was terrific, nor did the softness of the ground and the presence of some slimy weeds and creepers save my head from a bewildering jarring. For a moment I lay supine, too utterly startled to think. Then I half mechanically stumbled to my feet and began to scrape the worst of the mud and scum from my leather suit.

Of what I had encountered I could not form the faintest idea. I had seen nothing which could have caused the shock, and I saw nothing now. Had I, after all, merely slipped in the mud? My sore knuckles and aching chest forbade me to think so. Or was this whole incident an illusion brought on by some hidden mirage-plant? It hardly seemed probable, since I had none of the usual symptoms, and since there was no place near by where so vivid and typical a growth could lurk unseen. Had I been on the earth, I would have suspected a barrier of N-force laid down by some government to mark a forbidden zone, but in this humanless region such a notion would have been absurd.

Finally pulling myself together, I decided to investigate in a cautious way.

Holding my knife as far as possible ahead of me, so that it might be first to feel the strange force, I started once more for the shining crystal, preparing to advance step by step with the greatest deliberation. At the third step I was brought up short by the impact of the knife-point on an apparently solid surface — a solid surface where my eyes saw nothing.

After a moment's recoil I gained boldness. Extending my gloved left hand, I verified the presence of invisible solid matter—or a tactile illusion of solid matter—ahead of me. Upon moving my hand I found that the barrier was of substantial extent, and of an almost glassy smoothness, with no evidence of the joining of separate blocks. Nerving myself for further experiments, I removed a glove and tested the thing with my bare hand. It was indeed hard and glassy, and of a curious coldness as contrasted with the air around. I strained my eyesight to the utmost in an effort to glimpse some trace of the obstructing substance, but could discern nothing whatsoever. There was not even any evidence of refractive power as judged by the aspect of the landscape ahead. Absence of reflective power was proved by the lack of a glowing image of the sun at any point.

Burning curiosity began to displace all other feelings, and I enlarged my investigations as best I could. Exploring with my hands, I found that the barrier extended from the ground to some level higher than I could reach, and that it stretched off indefinitely on both sides. It was, then, a *wall* of some kind—though all guesses as to its materials and its purpose were beyond me. Again I thought of the mirage-plant and the dreams it induced, but a moment's reasoning put this out of my head.

Knocking sharply on the barrier with the hilt of my knife, and kicking at it with my heavy boots, I tried to interpret the sounds thus made. There was something suggestive of cement or concrete in these reverberations, though my hands had found the surface more glassy or metallic in feel. Certainly, I was confronting something strange beyond all previous experience.

The next logical move was to get some idea of the wall's dimensions. The height problem would be hard if not insoluble, but the length and shape problem could perhaps be sooner dealt with. Stretching out my arms and pressing close to the barrier, I began to edge gradually to the left —keeping very careful track of the way I faced. After several steps I concluded that the wall was not straight, but that I was following part of some vast circle or ellipse. And then my attention was distracted by something wholly different—something connected with the still-distant crystal which had formed the object of my quest.

I have said that even from a greater distance the shining object's position seemed indefinably queer—on a slight mound rising from the slime. Now, at about a hundred yards, I could see plainly despite the engulfing mist just what that mound was. It was the body of a man in one of the Crystal Company's leather suits, lying on his back, and with his oxygen mask half buried in the mud a few inches away. In his right hand, crushed convulsively against his chest, was the crystal which had led me here — a spheroid of incredible size, so large that the dead fingers could scarcely close over it. Even at the given distance I could see that the body was a recent one. There was little visible decay, and I reflected that in this climate such a thing meant death not more than a day before. Soon the hateful farnoth-flies would begin to cluster about the corpse.

I wondered who the man was. Surely no one I had seen on this trip. It must have been one of the old-timers absent on a long roving commission, who had come

to this especial region independently of Anderson's survey. There he lay, past all trouble, and with the rays of the great crystal streaming out from between his stiffened fingers.

FOR fully five minutes I stood there staring in bewilderment and apprehension. A curious dread assailed me, and I had an unreasonable impulse to run away. It could not have been done by those slinking man-lizards, for he still held the crystal he had found. Was there any connection with the invisible wall? Where had he found the crystal? Anderson's instrument had indicated one in this quarter well before this man could have perished. I now began to regard the unseen barrier as something sinister, and recoiled from it with a shudder. Yet I knew I must probe the mystery all the more quickly and thoroughly because of this recent tragedy.

Suddenly, wrenching my mind back to the problem I faced, I thought of a possible means of testing the wall's height, or at least of finding whether or not it extended indefinitely upward. Seizing a handful of mud, I let it drain until it gained some coherence and then flung it high in the air toward the utterly transparent barrier. At a height of perhaps fourteen feet it struck the invisible surface with a resounding splash, disintegrating at once and oozing downward in disappearing streams with surprising rapidity. Plainly, the wall was a lofty one. A second handful, hurled at an even sharper angle, hit the surface about eighteen feet from the ground and disappeared as quickly as the first.

I now summoned up all my strength and prepared to throw a third handful as high as I possibly could. Letting the mud drain, and squeezing it to maximum dryness, I flung it up so steeply that I feared it might not reach the obstructing surface at all. It did, however, and this time it crossed the barrier and fell in the mud beyond with a violent spattering. At last I had a rough idea of the height of the wall, for the crossing had evidently occurred some twenty or twenty-one feet aloft.

With a nineteen- or twenty-foot vertical wall of glassy flatness, ascent was clearly impossible. I must, then, continue to circle the barrier in the hope of finding a gate, an ending, or some sort of interruption. Did the obstacle form a complete round or other closed figure, or was it merely an arc or semicircle? Acting on my decision, I resumed my slow leftward circling, moving my hands up and down over the unseen surface on the chance of finding some window or other small aperture. Before starting, I tried to mark my position by kicking a hole in the mud, but found the slime too thin to hold any impression. I did, though, gage the place approximately by noting a tall cycad in the distant forest which seemed just on a line with the gleaming crystal a hundred yards away. If no gate or break existed I could not tell when I had completely circumnavigated the wall.

I had not progressed far before I decided that the curvature indicated a circular enclosure of about a hundred yards' diameter—provided the outline was regular. This would mean that the dead man lay near the wall at a point almost opposite to the region where I had started. Was he just inside or just outside the enclosure? This I would soon ascertain.

As I slowly rounded the barrier without finding any gate, window, or other break, I decided that the body was lying within. On closer view, the features of the dead man seemed vaguely disturbing. I found something alarming in his expression, and in the way the glassy eyes stared. By the time I was very near I believed I recognized him as Dwight, a veteran whom I had never known, but who was pointed out to me at the post last year. The crystal

he clutched was certainly a prize, the largest single specimen I had ever seen.

I was so near the body that I could, but for the barrier, have touched it, when my exploring left hand encounterd a corner in the unseen surface. In a second I had learned that there was an opening about three feet wide, extending from the ground to a height greater than I could reach. There was no door, nor any evidence of hinge-marks bespeaking a former door. Without a moment's hesitation I stepped through and advanced two paces to the prostrate body, which lay at right angles to the hallway I had entered, in what seemed to be an intersecting, doorless corridor. It gave me a fresh curiosity to find that the interior of this vast enclosure was divided by partitions.

Bending to examine the corpse, I discovered that it bore no wounds. This scarcely surprised me, since the continued presence of the crystal argued against the pseudo-reptilian natives. Looking about for some possible cause of death, my eyes lit upon the oxygen mask lying close to the body's feet. Here, indeed, was something significant. Without this device no human being could breathe the air of Venus for more than thirty seconds, and Dwight—if it were he—had obviously lost his. Probably it had been carelessly buckled, so that the weight of the tubes worked the straps loose—a thing which could not happen with a Dubois sponge-reservoir mask. The half-minute of grace had been too short to allow the man to stoop and recover his protection, or else the cyanogen content of the atmosphere was abnormally high at the time. Probably he had been busy admiring the crystal, wherever he may have found it. He had, apparently, just taken it from the pouch in his suit, for the flap was unbuttoned.

I now proceeded to extricate the huge crystal from the dead prospector's fingers —a task which the body's stiffness made very difficult. The spheroid was larger than a man's fist, and glowed as if alive in the reddish rays of the westering sun. As I touched the gleaming surface I shuddered involuntarily, as if by taking this precious object I had transferred to myself the doom which had overtaken its earlier bearer. However, my qualms soon passed, and I carefully buttoned the crystal into the pouch of my leather suit. Superstition has never been one of my failings.

Placing the man's helmet over his head, staring face, I straightened up and stepped back through the unseen doorway to the entrance hall of the great enclosure. All my curiosity about the strange edifice now returned, and I racked my brain with speculations regarding its material, origin, and purpose. That the hands of men had reared it I could not for a moment believe. Our ships first reached Venus only seventy-two years ago, and the only human beings on the planet have been those at Terra Nova. Nor does human knowledge include any perfectly transparent, non-refractive solid such as the substance of this building. Prehistoric human invasions of Venus can be pretty well ruled out, so that one must turn to the idea of native construction. Did a forgotten race of highly evolved beings precede the man-lizards as masters of Venus? Despite their elaborately built cities, it seemed hard to credit the pseudo-reptiles with anything of this kind. There must have been another race eons ago, of which this is perhaps the last relic. Or will other ruins of kindred origin be found by future expeditions? The *purpose* of such a structure passes all conjecture, but its strange and seemingly non-practical material suggests a religious use.

REALIZING my inability to solve these problems, I decided that all I could do was to explore the invisible structure itself. That various rooms and corridors extended over the seemingly unbroken

plain of mud I felt convinced, and I believed that a knowledge of their plan might lead to something significant. So, feeling my way back through the doorway and edging past the body, I began to advance along the corridor toward those interior regions whence the dead man had presumably come. Later on I would investigate the hallway I had left.

Groping like a blind man despite the misty sunlight, I moved slowly onward. Soon the corridor turned sharply and began to spiral in toward the center in ever-diminishing curves. Now and then my touch would reveal a doorless intersecting passage, and I several times encountered junctions with two, three, and four diverging avenues. In these latter cases I always followed the inmost route, which seemed to form a continuation of the one I had been traversing. There would be plenty of time to examine the branches after I had reached and returned from the main regions. I can scarcely describe the strangeness of the experience—threading the unseen ways of an invisible structure reared by forgotten hands on an alien planet!

At last, still stumbling and groping, I felt the corridor end in a sizable open space. Fumbling about, I found I was in a circular chamber about ten feet across; and from the position of the dead man against certain distant forest landmarks I judged that this chamber lay at or near the center of the edifice. Out of it opened five corridors besides the one through which I had entered, but I kept the latter in mind by sighting very carefully past the body to a particular tree on the horizon as I stood just within the entrance.

There was nothing in this room to distinguish it—merely the floor of thin mud which was everywhere present. Wondering whether this part of the building had any roof, I repeated my experiment with an upward-flung handful of mud, and found at once that no covering existed. If there had ever been one, it must have fallen long ago, for not a trace of debris or scattered blocks ever halted my feet. As I reflected, it struck me as distinctly odd that this apparently primordial structure should be so devoid of tumbled masonry, gaps in the walls, and other common attributes of dilapidation.

What was it? What had it ever been? Of what was it made? Why was there no evidence of separate blocks in the glassy, bafflingly homogeneous walls? Why were there no traces of doors, either interior or exterior? I knew only that I was in a round, roofless, doorless edifice of some hard, smooth, perfectly transparent, non-refractive and non-reflective material, a hundred yards in diameter, with many corridors, and with a small circular room at the center. More than this I could never learn from a direct investigation.

I now observed that the sun was sinking very low, a golden-ruddy disk floating in a pool of scarlet and orange above the mist-clouded trees of the horizon. Plainly, I would have to hurry if I expected to choose a sleeping-spot on dry ground before dark. I had long before decided to camp for the night on the firm, mossy rim of the plateau near the crest whence I had first spied the shining crystal, trusting to my usual luck to save me from an attack by the man-lizards. It has always been my contention that we ought to travel in parties of two or more, so that someone can be on guard during sleeping-hours, but the really small number of night attacks makes the Company careless about such things. Those scaly wretches seems to have difficulty in seeing at night, even with their curious glow-torches.

Having picked out again the hallway through which I had come, I started to return to the structure's entrance. Additional exploration could wait for another day. Groping a course as best I could

through the spiral corridor, with only general sense, memory, and a vague recognition of some of the ill-defined weed patches on the plain as guides, I soon found myself once more in close proximity to the corpse. There were now one or two farnoth-flies swooping over the helmet-covered face, and I knew that decay was setting in. With a futile but instinctive loathing I raised my hand to brush away this vanguard of the scavengers, when a strange and astonishing thing became manifest. An invisible wall, checking the sweep of my arm, told me that, notwithstanding my careful retracing of the way, I had not indeed returned to the corridor in which the body lay. Instead, I was in a parallel hallway, having no doubt taken some wrong turn or fork among the intricate passages behind.

Hoping to find a doorway to the exit hall ahead, I continued my advance, but presently came to a blank wall. I would, then, have to return to the central chamber and steer my course anew. Exactly where I had made my mistake I could not tell. I glanced at the ground to see if by any miracle guiding footprints had remained, but at once realized that the thin mud held impressions only for a few moments. There was little difficulty in finding my way to the center again, and once there I carefully reflected on the proper outward course. I had kept too far to the right before. This time I must take a more leftward fork somewhere—just where, I could decide as I went.

As I groped ahead a second time I felt quite confident of my correctness, and diverged to the left at a junction I was sure I remembered. The spiraling continued, and I was careful not to stray into any intersecting passages. Soon, however, I saw to my disgust that I was passing the body at a considerable distance; this passage evidently reached the outer wall at a point much beyond it. In the hope that another exit might exist in the half of the wall I had not yet explored, I pressed forward for several paces, but eventually came once more to a solid barrier. Clearly, the plan of the building was even more complicated than I had thought.

I now debated whether to return to the center again or whether to try some of the lateral corridors extending toward the body. If I chose this second alternative, I would run the risk of breaking my mental pattern of where I was; hence I had better not attempt it unless I could think of some way of leaving a visible trail behind me. Just how to leave a trail would be quite a problem, and I ransacked my mind for a solution. There seemed to be nothing about my person which could leave a mark on anything, nor any material which I could scatter.

MY PEN had no effect on the invisible wall, and I could not lay a trail of my precious food tablets. Even had I been willing to spare the latter, there would not have been even nearly enough; besides which, the small pellets would have instantly sunk from sight in the thin mud. I searched my pockets for an old-fashioned note-book — often used unofficially on Venus despite the quick rotting-rate of paper in the planet's atmosphere—whose pages I could tear up and scatter, but could find none. It was obviously impossible to tear the tough, thin metal of this revolving decay-proof record scroll, nor did my clothing offer any possibilities. In Venus's peculiar atmosphere I could not safely spare my stout leather suit, and underwear had been eliminated because of the climate.

I tried to smear mud on the smooth, invisible walls after squeezing it as dry as possible, but found that it slipped from sight as quickly as did the height-testing handfuls I had previously thrown. Finally I drew out my knife and attempted to

scratch a line on the glassy, phantom surface—something I could recognize with my hand, even though I would not have the advantage of seeing it from afar. It was useless, however, for the blade made not the slightest impression on the baffling, unknown material.

Frustrated in all attempts to blaze a trail, I again sought the round central chamber through memory. It seemed easier to get back to this room than to steer a definite, predetermined course away from it, and I had little difficulty in finding it anew. This time I listed on my record scroll every turn I made, drawing a crude hypothetical diagram of my route, and marking all diverging corridors. It was, of course, maddeningly slow work when everything had to be determined by touch, and the possibilities of error were infinite; but I believed it would pay in the long run.

The long twilight of Venus was thick when I reached the central room, but I still had hopes of gaining the outside before dark. Comparing my fresh diagram with previous recollections, I believed I had located my original mistake, so once more set out confidently along the invisible hallways. I veered further to the left than during my previous attempts, and tried to keep track of my turnings on the record scroll in case I was still mistaken. In the gathering dusk I could see the dim line of the corpse, now the center of a loathsome cloud of farnoth-flies. Before long, no doubt, the mud-dwelling sificlighs would be oozing in from the plain to complete the ghastly work. Approaching the body with some reluctance, I was preparing to step past it when a sudden collision with a wall told me I was again astray.

I now realized plainly that I was lost. The complications of this building were too much for offhand solution, and I would probably have to do some careful checking before I could hope to emerge. Still, I was eager to get to dry ground before total darkness set in; hence I returned once more to the center and began a rather aimless series of trials and errors — making notes by the light of my electric lamp. When I used this device I noticed with interest that it produced no reflection, not even the faintest glistening, in the transparent walls around me.

I was still groping about when the dusk became total. A heavy mist obscured most of the stars and planets, but the earth was plainly visible as a glowing, bluish-green point in the southeast. It was just past opposition, and would have been a glorious sight in a telescope. I could even make out the moon beside it whenever the vapors momentarily thinned. It was now impossible to see the corpse—my only landmark —so I blundered back to the central chamber after a few false turns. After all, I would have to give up hope of sleeping on dry ground. Nothing could be done till daylight, and I might as well make the best of it here. Lying down in the mud would not be pleasant, but in my leather suit it could be done. On former expeditions I had slept under even worse conditions, and now sheer exhaustion would help to conquer repugnance.

So here I am, squatting in the slime of the central room and taking these notes on my record scroll by the light of the electric lamp. There is something almost humorous in my strange, unprecedented plight. Lost in a building without doors—a building which I cannot see! I shall doubtless get out early in the morning, and ought to be back at Terra Nova with the crystal by late afternoon. It certainly is a beauty, with surprising luster even in the feeble light of this lamp. I have just had it out examining it. Despite my fatigue, sleep is slow in coming; so I find myself writing at great length. I must stop now. Not much danger of being bothered by those cursed natives in this place.

The thing I like least is the corpse, but fortunately my oxygen mask saves me from the worst effects. I am using the chlorate tubes very sparingly. Will take a couple of food tablets now and turn in. More later.

LATER—Afternoon, VI-13. There has been more trouble than I expected. I am still in the building, and will have to work quickly and wisely if I expect to rest on dry ground tonight. It took me a long time to get to sleep, and I did not wake till almost noon today. As it was, I would have slept longer but for the glare of the sun through the haze. The corpse was a rather bad sight, wriggling with sificlighs, and with a cloud of farnoth-flies around it. Something had pushed the helmet away from the face, and it was better not to look at it. I was doubly glad of my oxygen mask when I thought of the situation.

At length I shook and brushed myself dry, took a couple of food tablets, and put a new potassium chlorate cube in the electrolyzer of the mask. I am using these cubes slowly, but wish I had a larger supply. I felt much better after my sleep, and expected to get out of the building very shortly.

Consulting the notes and sketches I had jotted down, I was impressed with the complexity of the hallways, and the possibility that I had made a fundamental error. Of the six openings leading out of the central space, I had chosen a certain one as that by which I had entered—using a sighting-arrangement as a guide. When I stood just within the opening, the corpse fifty yards away was exactly in line with a particular lepidodendron in the far-off forest. Now it occurred to me that this sighting might not have been of sufficient accuracy, the distance of the corpse making its difference of direction in relation to the horizon comparatively slight when viewed from the openings next to that of my first ingress. Moreover, the tree did not differ as distinctly as it might from other lepidodendra on the horizon.

Putting the matter to a test, I found to my chagrin that I could not be sure which of three openings was the right one. Had I traversed a different set of windings at each attempted exit? This time I would be sure. It struck me that despite the impossibility of trail-blazing there was one marker I could leave. Though I could not spare my suit, I could — because of my thick head of hair—spare my helmet; and this was large and light enough to remain visible above the thin mud. Accordingly I removed the roughly hemispherical device and laid it at the entrance of one of the corridors—the right-hand one of the three I must try.

I would follow this corridor on the assumption that it was correct, repeating what I seemed to recall as the proper turns, and constantly consulting and making notes. If I did not get out, I would systematically exhaust all possible variations; and if these failed, I would proceed to cover the avenues extending from the next opening in the same way, continuing to the third opening if necessary. Sooner or later I could not avoid hitting the right path to the exit, but I must use patience. Even at worst, I could scarcely fail to reach the open plain in time for a dry night's sleep.

Immediate results were rather discouraging, though they helped me eliminate the right-hand opening in little more than an hour. Only a succession of blind alleys, each ending at a great distance from the corpse, seemed to branch from this hallway; and I saw very soon that it had not figured at all in the previous afternoon's wanderings. As before, however, I always found it relatively easy to grope back to the central chamber.

About 1 p.m. I shifted my helmet marker to the next opening and began to

explore the hallways beyond it. At first I thought I recognized the turnings, but soon found myself in a wholly unfamiliar set of corridors. I could not get near the corpse, and this time seemed cut off from the central chamber as well, even though I thought I had recorded every move I made. There seemed to be tricky twists and crossings too subtle for me to capture in my crude diagrams, and I began to develop a kind of mixed anger and discouragement. While patience would of course win in the end, I saw that my searching would have to be minute and tireless.

Two o'clock found me still wandering vainly through strange corridors, constantly feeling my way, looking alternately at my helmet and at the corpse, and jotting data on my scroll with decreasing confidence. I cursed the stupidity and idle curiosity which had drawn me into this tangle of unseen walls—reflecting that if I had let the thing alone and headed back as soon as I had taken the crystal from the body, I would even now be safe at Terra Nova.

Suddenly it occurred to me that I might be able to tunnel under the invisible walls with my knife, and thus effect a short-cut to the outside, or to some outward-leading corridor. I had no means of knowing how deep the building's foundations were, but the omnipresent mud argued the absence of any floor save the earth. Facing the distant and increasingly horrible corpse, I began a course of feverish digging with the broad, sharp blade.

THERE was about six inches of semi-liquid mud, below which the density of the soil increased sharply. This lower soil seemed to be of a different color, a grayish clay rather like the formations near Venus's north pole. As I continued downward close to the unseen barrier I saw that the ground was getting harder and harder. Watery mud rushed into the excavation as fast as I removed the clay, but I reached through it and kept on working. If I could bore any kind of a passage beneath the wall, the mud would not stop my wriggling out.

About three feet down, however, the hardness of the soil halted my digging seriously. Its tenacity was beyond anything I had encountered before, even on this planet, and was linked with an anomalous heaviness. My knife had to split and chip the tightly packed clay, and the fragments I brought up were like solid stones or bits of metal. Finally even this splitting and chipping became impossible, and I had to cease my work with no lower edge of the wall in reach.

The hour-long attempt was a wasteful as well as futile one, for it used up great stores of my energy and forced me both to take an extra food tablet, and to put an additional chlorate cube in the oxygen mask. It has also brought a pause in the day's gropings, for I am still much too exhausted to walk. After cleaning my hands and arms of the worst of the mud I sat down to write these notes—leaning against an invisible wall and facing away from the corpse.

That body is simply a writhing mass of vermin now—the odor has begun to draw some of the slimy akmans from the far-off jungle. I notice that many of the efjeh-weeds on the plain are reaching out necrophagous feelers toward the thing; but I doubt if any are long enough to reach it. I wish some really carnivorous organisms like the skorahs would appear, for then they might scent me and wriggle a course through the building toward me. Things like that have an odd sense of direction. I could watch them as they came, and jot down their approximate route if they failed to form a continuous line. Even that would be a great help. When I met any, the pistol would make short work of them.

But I can hardly hope for as much as that. Now that these notes are made I shall rest a while longer, and later will do some more groping. As soon as I get back to the central chamber—which ought to be fairly easy—I shall try the extreme left-hand opening. Perhaps I can get outside by dusk after all.

NIGHT—VI-13. New trouble. My escape will be tremendously difficult, for there are elements I had not suspected. Another night here in the mud, and a fight on my hands tomorrow. I cut my rest short and was up and groping again by four o'clock. After about fifteen minutes I reached the central chamber and moved my helmet to mark the last of the three possible doorways. Starting through this opening, I seemed to find the going more familiar, but was brought up short in less than five minutes by a sight that jolted me more than I can describe.

It was a group of four or five of those detestable man-lizards emerging from the forest far off across the plain. I could not see them distinctly at that distance, but thought they paused and turned toward the trees to gesticulate, after which they were joined by fully a dozen more. The augmented party now began to advance directly toward the invisible building, and as they approached I studied them carefully. I had never before had a close view of the things outside the steamy shadows of the jungle.

The resemblance to reptiles was perceptible, though I knew it was only an apparent one, since these beings have no point of contact with terrestrial life. When they drew nearer they seemed less truly reptilian, only the flat head and the green, slimy, frog-like skin carrying out the idea. They walked erect on their odd, thick stumps, and their suction-disks made curious noises in the mud. These were average specimens, about seven feet in height, and with four long, ropy pectoral tentacles. The motions of those tentacles—if the theories of Fogg, Ekberg, and Janat are right, which I formerly doubted but am now more ready to believe—indicated that the things were in animated conversation.

I drew my flame-pistol and was ready for a hard fight. The odds were bad, but the weapon gave me a certain advantage. If the things knew this building they would come through it after me, and in this way would form a key to getting out, just as carnivorous skorahs might have done. That they would attack me seemed certain; for even though they could not see the crystal in my pouch, they could divine its presence through that special sense of theirs.

Yet, surprisingly enough, they did not attack me. Instead they scattered and formed a vast circle around me, at a distance which indicated that they were pressing close to the unseen wall. Standing there in a ring, the beings stared silently and inquisitively at me, waving their tentacles and sometimes nodding their heads and gesturing with their upper limbs. After a while I saw others issue from the forest, and these advanced and joined the curious crowd. Those near the corpse looked briefly at it but made no move to disturb it. It was a horrible sight, yet the man-lizards seemed quite unconcerned. Now and then one of them would brush away the farnoth-flies with its limbs or tentacles, or crush a wriggling sificligh or akman, or an out-reaching efjch-weed, with the suction disks on its stumps.

Staring back at these grotesque and unexpected intruders, and wondering uneasily why they did not attack me at once, I lost for the time being the will-power and nervous energy to continue my search for a way out. Instead I leaned limply against the invisible wall of the passage where I stood, letting my wonder merge gradually

into a chain of the wildest speculations. A hundred mysteries which had previously baffled me seemed all at once to take on a new and sinister significance, and I trembled with an acute fear unlike anything I had experienced before.

I believed I knew why these repulsive beings were hovering expectantly around me. I believed, too, that I had the secret of the transparent structure at last. The alluring crystal which I had seized, the body of the man who had seized it before me—all these things began to acquire a dark and threatening meaning.

It was no common series of mischances which had made me lose my way in this roofless, unseen tangle of corridors. Far from it. Beyond doubt, the place was a genuine maze, a labyrinth deliberately built by these hellish beings whose craft and mentality I had so badly underestimated. Might I not have suspected this before, knowing of their uncanny architectural skill? The purpose was all too plain. It was a trap—a trap set to catch human beings, and with the crystal spheroid as bait. These reptilian things, in their war on the takers of crystals, had turned to strategy and were using our own cupidity against us.

Dwight—if this rotting corpse were indeed he—was a victim. He must have been trapped some time ago, and had failed to find his way out. Lack of water had doubtless maddened him, and perhaps he had run out of chlorate cubes as well. Probably his mask had not slipped accidentally after all. Suicide was a likelier thing. Rather than face a lingering death he had solved the issue by removing the mask deliberately and letting the lethal atmosphere do its work at once. The horrible irony of his fate lay in his position—only a few feet from the saving exit he had failed to find. One minute more of searching, and he would have been safe.

And now I was trapped as he had been; trapped, and with this circling herd of curious starers to mock at my predicament. The thought was maddening, and as it sank in I was seized with a sudden flash of panic which set me running aimlessly through the unseen hallways. For several moments I was essentially a maniac—stumbling, tripping, bruising myself on the invisible walls, and finally collapsing in the mud as a panting, lacerated heap of mindless, bleeding flesh.

THE fall sobered me a bit, so that when I slowly struggled to my feet I could notice things and exercise my reason. The circling watchers were swaying their tentacles in an odd, irregular way suggestive of sly, alien laughter, and I shook my fist savagely at them as I rose. My gesture seemed to increase their hideous mirth—a few of them clumsily imitating it with their greenish upper limbs. Shamed into sense, I tried to collect my faculties and take stock of the situation.

After all, I was not as badly off as Dwight had been. Unlike him, I knew what the situation was—and forewarned is forearmed. I had proof that the exit was attainable in the end, and would not repeat his tragic act of impatient despair. The body—or skeleton, as it would soon be—was constantly before me as a guide to the sought-for aperture, and dogged patience would certainly take me to it if I worked long and intelligently enough.

I had, however, the disadvantage of being surrounded by these reptilian devils. Now that I realized the nature of the trap—whose invisible material argued a science and technology beyond anything on earth—I could no longer discount the mentality and resources of my enemies. Even with my flame-pistol I would have a bad time getting away, though boldness and quickness would doubtless see me through in the long run.

But first I must reach the exterior, un-

less I could lure or provoke some of the creatures to advance toward me. As I prepared my pistol for action and counted over my generous supply of ammunition it occurred to me to try the effect of its blasts on the invisible walls. Had I overlooked a feasible means of escape? There was no clue to the chemical composition of the transparent barrier, and conceivably it might be something which a tongue of fire could cut like cheese. Choosing a section facing the corpse, I carefully discharged the pistol at close range and felt with my knife where the blast had been aimed. Nothing was changed. I had seen the flame spread when it struck the surface, and now I realized that my hope had been vain. Only a long, tedious search for the exit would ever bring me to the outside.

So, swallowing another food tablet and putting another cube in the electrolyzer of my mask, I recommenced the long quest, retracing my steps to the central chamber and starting out anew. I constantly consulted my notes and sketches, and made fresh ones, taking one false turn after another, but staggering on in desperation till the afternoon light grew very dim. As I persisted in my quest I looked from time to time at the silent circle of mocking starers, and noticed a gradual replacement in their ranks. Every now and then a few would return to the forest, while others would arrive to take their places. The more I thought of their tactics the less I liked them, for they gave me a hint of the creatures' possible motives. At any time these devils could have advanced and fought me, but they seemed to prefer watching my struggles to escape. I could not but infer that they enjoyed the spectacle—and this made me shrink with double force from the prospect of falling into their hands.

With the dark I ceased my searching, and sat down in the mud to rest. Now I am writing in the light of my lamp, and will soon try to get some sleep. I hope tomorrow will see me out; for my canteen is low, and lacol tablets are a poor substitute for water. I would hardly dare try the moisture in this slime, for none of the water in the mud-regions is potable except when distilled. That is why we run such long pipe-lines to the yellow clay regions, or depend on rain-water when those devils find and cut our pipes. I have none too many chlorate cubes either, and must try to cut down my oxygen consumption as much as I can. My tunneling attempt of the early afternoon, and my later panic flight, burned up a perilous amount of air. Tomorrow I will reduce physical exertion to the barest minimum until I meet the reptiles and have to deal with them. I must save a good cube supply for the journey back to Terra Nova. My enemies are still on hand; I can see a circle of their feeble glow-torches around me. There is a horror about those lights which will keep me awake.

NIGHT—VI-14. Another full day of searching and still no way out! I am beginning to be worried about the water problem, for my canteen went dry at noon. In the afternoon there was a burst of rain, and I went back to the central chamber for the helmet which I had left as a marker—using this as a bowl, and getting about two cupfuls of water. I drank most of it, but have put the slight remainder in my canteen.

Lacol tablets make little headway against real thirst, and I hope there will be more rain in the night. I am leaving my helmet bottom-up to catch any that falls. Food tablets are none too plentiful, but not dangerously low. I shall halve my rations from now on. The chlorate cubes are my real worry, for even without violent exercise the day's endless tramping burned a dangerous number. I feel weak from my forced economies in oxygen, and from

my constantly mounting thirst. When I reduce my food I suppose I shall feel still weaker.

There is something damnable—something uncanny—about this labyrinth. I could swear that I had eliminated certain turns through charting, and yet each new trial belies some assumption I had thought established. Never before did I realize how lost we are without visual landmarks. A blind man might do better, but for most of us sight is the king of the senses. The effect of all these fruitless wanderings is one of profound discouragement. I can understand how poor Dwight must have felt. His corpse is now just a skeleton, and the sificlighs and akmans and farnoth-flies are gone. The efjeh-weeds are nipping the leather clothing to pieces, for they were longer and faster-growing than I had expected. And all the while those relays of tentacled starers stand gloatingly around the barrier laughing at me and enjoying my misery. Another day and I shall go mad if I do not drop dead from exhaustion.

However, there is nothing to do but persevere. Dwight would have got out if he had kept on a minute longer. It is just possible that somebody from Terra Nova will come looking for me before long, although this is only my third day out. My muscles ache horribly, and I can't seem to rest at all lying down in this loathsome mud. Last night, despite my terrific fatigue, I slept only fitfully, and tonight I fear will be no better. I live in an endless nightmare —poised between waking and sleeping, yet neither truly awake nor truly asleep. My hand shakes, and I can write no more for the time being. That circle of feeble glow-torches is hideous.

LATE afternoon—VI-15. Substantial progress! Looks good. Very weak, and did not sleep much till daylight. Then I dozed till noon, though without being at all rested. No rain, and thirst leaves me very weak. Ate an extra food tablet to keep me going, but without water it didn't help much. I dared to try a little of the slime water just once, but it made me violently sick and left me even thirstier than before. Must save chlorate cubes, so am nearly suffocating for lack of oxygen. Can't walk much of the time, but manage to crawl in the mud. About 2 p.m. I thought I recognized some passages, and got substantially nearer to the corpse—or skeleton—than I had been since the first day's trials. I was sidetracked once in a blind alley, but recovered the main trail with the aid of my chart and notes. The trouble with these jottings is that there are so many of them. They must cover three feet of the record-scroll, and I have to stop for long periods to untangle them. My head is weak from thirst, suffocation, and exhaustion, and I cannot understand all I have set down. Those damnable green things keep staring and laughing with their tentacles, and sometimes they gesticulate in a way that makes me think they share some terrible joke just beyond my perception.

It was three o'clock when I really struck my stride. There was a doorway which, according to my notes, I had not traversed before; and when I tried it I found I could crawl circuitously toward the weed-twined skeleton. The route was a sort of spiral, much like that by which I had first reached the central chamber. Whenever I came to a lateral doorway or junction I would keep to the course which seemed best to repeat that original journey. As I circled nearer and nearer to my gruesome landmark, the watchers outside intensified their cryptic gesticulations and sardonic silent laughter. Evidently they saw something grimly amusing in my progress, perceiving no doubt how helpless I would be in any encounter with them. I was content to leave them to their mirth; for although I realized my extreme weakness, I counted on the flame-

pistol and its numerous extra magazines to get me through the vile reptilian phalanx.

Hope now soared high, but I did not attempt to rise to my feet. Better to crawl now, and save my strength for the coming encounter with the man-lizards. My advance was very slow, and the danger of straying into some blind alley very great, but none the less I seemed to curve steadily toward my osseous goal. The prospect gave me new strength and for the nonce I ceased to worry about my pain, my thirst, and my scant supply of cubes. The creatures were now all massing around the entrance, gesturing, leaping, and laughing with their tentacles. Soon, I reflected, I would have to face the entire horde, and perhaps such reinforcements as they would receive from the forest.

I am now only a few yards from the skeleton, and am pausing to make this entry before emerging and breaking through the noxious band of entities. I feel confident that with my last ounce of strength I can put them to flight despite their numbers, for the range of this pistol is tremendous. Then a camp on the dry moss at the plateau's edge, and in the morning a weary trip through the jungle to Terra Nova. I shall be glad to see living men and the buildings of human beings again. The teeth of that skull gleam and grin horribly.

TOWARD night—VI-15. Horror and despair. Baffled again! After making the previous entry I approached still closer to the skeleton, but suddenly encountered an intervening wall. I had been deceived once more, and was apparently back where I had been three days before, on my first futile attempt to leave the labyrinth. Whether I screamed aloud I do not know—perhaps I was too weak to utter a sound. I merely lay dazed in the mud for a long period, while the greenish things outside leaped and laughed and gestured.

After a time I became more fully conscious. My thirst and weakness and suffocation were fast gaining on me, and with my last bit of strength I put a new cube in the electrolyzer, recklessly, and without regard for the needs of my journey to Terra Nova. The fresh oxygen revived me slightly, and enabled me to look about more alertly.

It seemed as if I were slightly more distant from poor Dwight than I had been at that first disappointment, and I dully wondered if I could be in some other corridor a trifle more remote. With this faint shadow of hope I laboriously dragged myself forward, but after a few feet encountered a dead end as I had on the former occasion.

This, then, was the end. Three days had taken me nowhere, and my strength was gone. I would soon go mad from thirst, and I could no longer count on cubes enough to get me back. I feebly wondered why the nightmare things had gathered so thickly around the entrance as they mocked me. Probably this was part of the mockery—to make me think I was approaching an egress which they knew did not exist.

I shall not last long, though I am resolved not to hasten matters as Dwight did. His grinning skull has just turned toward me, shifted by the groping of one of the efjeh-weeds that are devouring his leather suit. The ghoulish stare of those empty eye-sockets is worse than the staring of those lizard horrors. It lends a hideous meaning to that dead, white-toothed grin.

I shall lie very still in the mud and save all the strength I can. This record, which I hope may reach and warn those who come after me, will soon be done. After I stop writing I shall rest a long while. Then, when it is too dark for those frightful creatures to see, I shall muster up my last reserves of strength and try to toss the rec-

ord-scroll over the wall and the intervening corridor to the plain outside. I shall take care to send it toward the left, where it will not hit the leaping band of mocking beleaguerers. Perhaps it will be lost for ever in the thin mud—but perhaps it will land in some widespread clump of weeds and ultimately reach the hands of men.

If it does survive to be read, I hope it may do more than merely warn men of this trap. I hope it may teach our race to let those shining crystals stay where they are. They belong to Venus alone. Our planet does not truly need them, and I believe we have violated some obscure and mysterious law—some law buried deep in the arcana of the cosmos—in our attempts to take them. Who can tell what dark, potent and widespread forces spur on these reptilian things who guard their treasure so strangely? Dwight and I have paid, as others have paid and will pay. But it may be that these scattered deaths are only the prelude of greater horrors to come. Let us leave to Venus that which belongs only to Venus.

* * * * *

I am very near death now, and fear I may not be able to throw the scroll when dusk comes. If I cannot, I suppose the man-lizards will seize it, for they will probably realize what it is. They will not wish anyone to be warned of the labyrinth—and they will not know that my message holds a plea in their own behalf. As the end approaches I feel more kindly toward the things. In the scale of cosmic entity who can say which species stands higher, or more nearly approaches a space-wide organic norm—theirs or mine?

* * * * *

I have just taken the great crystal out of my pouch to look at it in my last moments. It shines fiercely and menacingly in the red rays of the dying day. The leaping horde have noticed it, and their gestures have changed in a way I cannot understand. I wonder why they keep clustered around the entrance instead of concentrating at a still closer point in the transparent wall.

* * * * *

I am growing numb and cannot write much more. Things whirl around me, yet I do not lose consciousness. Can I throw this over the wall? That crystal glows so, yet the twilight is deepening.

* * * * *

Dark. Very weak. They are still laughing and leaping around the doorway, and have started those hellish glow-torches.

* * * * *

Are they going away? I dreamed I heard a sound . . . light in the sky. . . .

*Report of Wesley P. Miller, Supt. Group A, Venus Crystal Co.*
(Terra Nova on Venus—VI-16)

OUR Operative A-49, Kenton J. Stanfield of 531 Marshall Street, Richmond, Va., left Terra Nova early on VI-12 for a short-term trip indicated by detector. Due back 13th or 14th. Did not appear by evening of 15th, so Scouting Plane FR-58 with five men under my command set out at 8 p.m. to follow route with detector. Needle showed no change from earlier readings.

Followed needle to Erycinian Highland, playing strong searchlights all the way. Triple-range flame-guns and D-radiation cylinders could have dispersed any ordinary hostile force of natives, or any dangerous aggregation of carnivorous skorahs.

When over the open plain on Eryx we saw a group of moving lights which we knew were native glow-torches. As we approached, they scattered into the forest. Probably seventy-five to a hundred in all. Detector indicated crystal on spot where they had been. Sailing low over this spot, our lights picked out objects on the ground. Skeleton tangled in efjeh-weeds, and com-

plete body ten feet from it. Brought plane down near bodies, and corner of wing crashed on unseen obstruction.

Approaching bodies on foot, we came up short against a smooth, invisible barrier which puzzled us enormously. Feeling along it near the skeleton, we struck an opening, beyond which was a space with another opening leading to the skeleton. The latter, though robbed of clothing by weeds, had one of the company's numbered metal helmets beside it. It was Operative B-9, Frederick N. Dwight of Koenig's division, who had been out of Terra Nova for two months on a long commission.

Between this skeleton and the complete body there seemed to be another wall, but we could easily identify the second man as Stanfield. He had a record-scroll in his left hand and a pen in his right, and seemed to have been writing when he died. No crystal was visible, but the detector indicated a huge specimen near Stanfield's body.

We had great difficulty in getting at Stanfield, but finally succeeded. The body was still warm, and a great crystal lay beside it, covered by the shallow mud. We at once studied the record-scroll in the left hand, and prepared to take certain steps based on its data. The contents of the scroll forms the long narrative prefixed to this report; a narrative whose main descriptions we have verified, and which we append as an explanation of what was found. The latter parts of this account show mental decay, but there is no reason to doubt the bulk of it. Stanfield obviously died of a combination of thirst, suffocation, cardiac strain and psychological depression. His mask was in place, and freely generating oxygen despite an alarmingly low cube supply.

Our plane being damaged, we sent a wireless and called out Anderson with Repair Plane FG-7, a crew of wreckers, and a set of blasting-materials. By morning FH-58 was fixed, and went back under Anderson carrying the two bodies and the crystal. We shall bury Dwight and Stanfield in the company graveyard, and ship the crystal to Chicago on the next earth-bound liner. Later we shall adopt Stanfield's suggestion—the sound one in the saner, earlier part of his report—and bring across enough troops to wipe out the natives altogether. With a clear field, there will be scarcely any limit to the amount of crystal we can secure.

In the afternoon we studied the invisible building or trap with great care, exploring it with the aid of long guiding cords, and preparing a complete chart for our archives. We were much impressed by the design, and shall keep specimens of the substance for chemical analysis. All such knowledge will be useful when we take over the various cities of the natives. Our type C diamond drills were able to bite into the unseen material, and the wreckers are now planting dynamite preparatory to a thorough blasting. Nothing will be left when we are done. The edifice forms a distinct menace to aerial and other possible traffic.

In considering the plan of the labyrinth one is impressed not only with the irony of Dwight's fate, but with that of Stanfield's as well. When trying to reach the second body from the skeleton, we could find no access on the right, but Markheim found a doorway from the first inner space some fifteen feet past Dwight and four or five past Stanfield. Beyond this was a long hall which we did not explore till later, but on the right-hand side of that hall was another doorway leading directly to the body. Stanfield could have reached the outside entrance by walking twenty-two or twenty-three feet if he had found the opening which lay directly *behind* him —an opening which he overlooked in his exhaustion and despair.

"From the half-dark a flittermouse came chirping."

# King of the World's Edge

By H. WARNER MUNN

*An odyssey of a strange voyage to America in King Arthur's time—*
*a fascinating story of heroic adventures and eery thrills*
*—an absorbing weird tale, crammed with action*

*The Story Thus Far*

VENTIDIUS VARRO, the narrator, lived in the dark days of Britain's history immediately after the recall of the legions back to Rome for the protection of that city. Saxons, Picts and Caledonians fought for the rich lowlands and in all Britain the only force powerful enough to combat them was the remnants of the Sixth Legion, Victrix, left to hold the Wall of Hadrian. Repeatedly decimated, its original Roman quota gone, its

ranks are rebuilt from British-born levies of which Varro is one.

While he is reaching the rank of centurion, Arthur Pendragon has made himself Imperator of North and South Wales, carried the war into Saxon lands and is on the way to freeing Britain, when treachery defeats him.

Varro, present at the battle of Camlan, witnesses the apparent death of Arthur, whom Merlin the enchanter has cast into a deep slumber until his dreadful wounds are healed.

He is carried to the seacoast, where they find that Lyonesse, Arthur's natal land, has been sunk beneath the sea by the wizardry of Vivienne, Merlin's wife, the Lady of the Lake, piqued by the loss of Excalibur which Sir Bedwyr refused to throw into her mere.

They hide Arthur in a crypt on Saint Michael's Mount and, knowing that they must be fugitives in a Saxon Britain, determine upon a desperate voyage westward in Arthur's great dromon, the *Prydwen,* to find perhaps a land of refuge for Rome's hard-pressed subjects, already rumored to exist far beyond the western sea.

Saxon slaves mutiny, they suffer famine and thirst, but are preserved by Merlin's magic and superior scientific wisdom. They find Brandon's Isle, now Cuba, and in the marshes of Florida are attacked by a fierce sea-people, partly man, partly fish. Here Guthlac, a Saxon chieftain, is taken prisoner by these Piasa.

Following the coast, they are overtaken by storm and are wrecked. Most of the adventurers are drowned, among them the sailors, the remaining Saxons, the shipman and the smith.

The survivors, fifty in number, are drying themselves around a fire when they find themselves observed by a number of very peculiar people.

The story continues.

*Part II*

*7. Captives of Tlapallan*

IT WAS a stern, well-armed gathering of human warriors who had come out of the pine wood above, and outnumbering us by at least a score, they showed no fear of us naked strangers, but stood and inspected us while none moved on either side.

Then their leader stepped forward and raised his right arm in salute, with his open palm toward us.

As he, with slight modifications denoting superior rank, was dressed like the others, his description will fit almost all.

His skin was the color of copper, and his accouterments harmonized, for he wore a shining copper breast-plate from his shoulders to his belly and wide copper bracelets on wrists and forearms.

Upon his head a copper helmet glistened and in it were fixed stag antlers; though this being open at the top, so that an enemy might easier remove his scalp as a battle trophy, it was really not a galea, but more resembled a circlet, thick, heavy, and a palm wide.

He was cinctured with a copper band, broad and thick, beginning just below the breast-plate, which protected his loins and supported a scant woven skirt, spangled with glittering circles of mica.

Around his neck he wore a broad collar of bear's teeth, jingling shell and pearls, while in his left hand he carried a copper hatchet, bound on a wooden handle.

Now on either side, surrounding us, came up other bands of barbaric fighting-men, dressed in the same manner, but less richly, their breast-plates and cinctures not so broad or thick, and lacking the mica on their skirts, while centurions each wore a single string of ornaments and the men in ranks none at all.

Thus were we flanked, in a manner showing considerable military discipline.

Some of our adversaries bore lances, others held throwing-sticks poised ready to hurl a featherless dart, while three in every group of ten men had swung behind them four-foot sticks with one end bent and hollowed like a ladle. These last, the engineers of this rude army, had placed heavy stones in the cup of the ladle, so that the whole apparatus formed a deadly, though small, catapult to menace our naked, unarmed band.

Before and on either side, imagine these grim, silent, copper men; behind us the raging sea. Do you think shame to us, given no choice except that of surrender or extinction, that we surrendered?

We were cold and not yet dried, our spirits low from the events of the night. A little way up the beach lay our friends and companions, stiff and stark in death. A snap of the fingers, a cross look, a careless motion, and we would have mingled our bones with theirs.

If our good bows had been dry and strung, our slingers ready, our swords in reach, then indeed there might be a different tale—but you, my Emperor, might have no subject king to write you of it and no kingdom to grasp in this strange country.

I spoke to the commander, who had come out to meet us. While the men behind us listened, I tried him with Latin, Cymric and Saxon with no result, bitterly regretting that our two islanders, who might have interpreted, had drowned, bound tightly to their bunks.

He replied in a soft speech, then as that brought no response from me, used another which is spoken entirely without motion of the lips. I understand neither.

Myrdhinn came out between the lines, in his clinging, sodden robes, the only man clothed in our group, and began to talk in the language of the Druids, following this as he told me later with Greek, Hebrew and various Gaulish dialects—all without any valuable result, although occasionally a word would strike this barbarian commander as being familiar and he would interrupt and repeat the word, to find that it was not after all what he had thought it to be.

He stood and listened with a look of deepening bewilderment and indecision, then terminated the parley by turning his back upon us and waving in his men.

As they seized upon us, Myrdhinn cried, "Do not resist!" to our men, and we were led with the rest into the wood upon the knoll and surrounded by a company of lancers whose harsh looks and threatening manner gave us little hope for a successful outbreak.

WE SAT down or reclined, talking very little, watching from our elevated position our captor and his subordinate officers (easily picked out by their antler-decorated helmets) as they went through our rescued possessions, obviously marveling at some things and contemptuously casting down other articles.

Steel and iron especially fascinated them, as also to a lesser degree did our articles of cast bronze, which metal was close enough to their native copper for them to recognize, but whose hardness and temper they could not understand when one came across my case of razors and promptly sliced off his finger-tip in feeling of the edge.

All these metal things they laid to one side, made various piles of the other items, classifying by weight, size and estimated value; after which they all went down to the shore and stood looking at the remains of our ship for a long time.

Then they came back, and the officers replaced some of our guards, while those released men joined the others in stripping and plunging into the water. In a surprisingly short time they had stripped the Prydwen of everything movable; every

bolt, clamp, nail and scrap of metal they could tear, pry or break away.

The after portion of the divided ship, being sunk, they did not bother with at this time, but the arrow engines and the tormentæ lost everything, being dismantled, brought ashore and fire made from our campfire to burn away the clamps from the beams.

After everything possible was gathered upon the beach, we were led down and laden like beasts of burden with our own gear. They made bundles larger than I had thought man could carry; yet we carried them on our backs by means of a looped thong on each, which broadened to a band where it crossed our foreheads. This enabled the neck muscles to do a large share of the work, and truly this simple invention was of great help and I can recommend it to the large slave-owners in Rome, who find mules and baggage animals expensive.

In this country, wherever I have been, there are no beasts of burden, except where dogs (little better than domesticated wolves) are used, and men have learned this handy trick to save their backs.

It did not save ours, however, for we were laden far heavier than otherwise we might have been, and in a long line we plodded down the beach in the direction of the inlet. We were obliged to pass by the bodies of our dead, and here we saw a revolting sight.

These bodies had been previously stripped and robbed, but there was upon even a naked man one more thing to steal and three ghouls were about that grisly business. We gazed in horror.

The barbarians lifted each head in turn, ran a sharp knife around the skull, dug fingers into the cut and tore the hair away. It was done in an instant, almost before we could utter a cry of protest, and followed by a quick scraping to clean off the fragments of flesh which still clung to the hairy cap which resulted.

We were sickened and revolted, knowing now for certain of the bitter cruelty and horror of this country's customs and feeling, too, a rising dread of the future which awaited us wherever we were about to be conducted.

Lance-butts drove us on. We staggered and weaved beneath our enormous loads, following a fisherman's path into the wood.

Behind us lay our dead, denied a Christian burial, mutilated, naked and pitiful! They seemed a symbol of all we had lost, and if ever dead cried mutely for vengeance, those sad bodies on this cursed shore dinned it into our minds. I think all of us felt it deeply and were the more silent as we passed into and among the trees.

Myrdhinn was the only man inclined to speak.

"These folk must be kin to the Scythians. They have the same trick of denuding the skull to the ears. I presume they tan the trophies later or smoke——"

But he got no further. His nearest guard turned viciously and without a sound of explanation, struck him across the mouth with the flat of his stone hatchet.

So we went on without conversation, Myrdhinn with a beard no longer white, but red, and dripping on his embroidered robe.

At the time we thought this another proof of needless and malicious cruelty, but learned that they had good reason thus to command silence. We had not gone a mile, when without warning, one of the officers who stood beside our line of march, as we plodded, captor and captive, in single file along the narrow path, suddenly clutched his throat as though strangling, and coughing blood he sank to his knees and rolled upon his side.

Immediately there was confusion. Men grasped their atlatls (or throwing-sticks)

and fitted darts to them; lancers charged through the underbrush to left and right, raising a shrill war-cry of "Ya-hi-ee-hee!" and in among us all fell a shower of stones, striking down impartially prisoners and guards.

At once the quiet wood became a howling Saturnalia. Back came the lancers, closely pursued by a press of savage painted men, so horribly daubed that they seemed scarcely human, and a struggle to the death began. On the outskirts of the fight circled a few dancing oldsters, too feeble to wield club or hatchet, screaming on their fellows to the attack, and frequently lifting long tubes of cane to their mouths, sending by their breath small darts among us.

It was one of these which had brought low the officer first to fall, piercing his jugular, though any prick would have been dangerous, each dart having been dipped in rotting meat until green.

Our captors were by no means idle, their armor proving a decided advantage, as time and again we could see them catch deftly some blow of hatchet, club or lance upon copper armlet or breast-plate and quickly run their adversary through or split his skull in return.

For these savage attackers were driven mad by sight of carnage and would pause over some fallen man to rip off his hair, without considering the battle raging round about, so that another might easily strike *him* down all unperceived.

WE POOR captives scarcely knew which side to cheer for, being between two calamities, nor were we touched after that first volley of stones; so it seemed to me that perhaps we white-skins were that prize for which both red peoples fought. If this be so, I thought, far better that we stay where we were than flee to such dubious succor as these naked painted fiends could offer.

At very least, the accouterments of our captors bespoke civilization in some degree, and thinking thus, I chose sides in that screaming hell of blood and fury—and acted.

Near me fought the commander, beset by three. One he lanced, one he brained, but the third brought him low with a knobbed stick and howling with glee whipped out a stone knife and sprang upon him.

That was enough for me. I flung off my pack, and all naked and unarmed as I was, I sank my fingers in the savage throat. I could see the astonishment in the commander's face as we struggled over and upon him, but my antagonist gave me no time to think.

His body was oiled and slippery. He stank of rancid bear fat, smoke and fur, and in my grip he twisted like a serpent, drove his knife through my forearm and out again in a twink of an eye, and would have had it through my throat in another, had not the commander rolled from beneath us, seized his hatchet and split that ferocious visage from hair-roots to teeth.

I snatched the knife and sprang up. "Ya-hi-ee-hee!" I howled. The commander echoed it with the first smile I had seen since we landed upon this bloody coast, and back to back we beat off those who still dashed themselves upon us.

Though too busy to look about, I heard others of my companions follow my example, and with good British cheers join in the affray. Suddenly the waves of battle ceased to break upon our stubborn line. Attackers and attacked stood listening. Faint and far a cry arose, long, ululating and eery—and was repeated.

Stopping not for dead or wounded, our foes slipped back into the wood and disappeared as a company of well-armed barbaric soldiery panted up and took control of the field.

We were now after a brief rest compelled to give up our weapons, and to

resume our burdens; though all of us were treated with a measure of respect and not forced to hurry as before, for the feared attack was over and done and now the woods were safe.

After a little, the commander came back to me and seeing that I was in pain from my arm wound, he signaled to one of his men to carry my pack and walked on with me some distance trying to find some manner in which we might exchange ideas. Finally he gave up, with a humorous quirk of the mouth, and eyed me for a bit.

Then he carefully pronounced the syllables, "Ha-yon-wa-tha," several times and tapped his breast, setting his necklace of teeth and pearls to rattling.

"So that is your name, is it, my noble barbarian?" I thought, and tapped my own breast.

"Ventidius Varro," I repeated, but this was too much for him, and after boggling over the V sound, he christened me "Haro" at first, and sometime later began calling me "Atoharo," this being the nearest he ever came to my true name.

"Haro! Haro!" he now said, holding up one hand with fingers spread. "Hayonwatha!" holding out the other in the same way.

Then with a rippling outpour of his labial language, he clasped his hands to symbolize the union of us twain. He touched his heart and held out his left hand. It was easy to understand that heart and friendship went with the offer, and I gladly proffered my left, pleased to have found a friend so easily, but he was not yet done.

Unloosing his knife he made an incision in his own arm, clapping the bleeding place to my wound that the bloodstreams might mingle. So I gained a blood brother who, though I could not then foresee it, was to become a stanch ally and a true friend in the years ahead.

While this was taking place, we had all been pressing on with vigor through the forest and now, without warning, debouched into a clearing of several acres, in the center of which was a palisaded fort of logs, strong and high-walled, as befitted a far outpost in a savage country held in peace only by constant raids and forays.

My new-found friend had me stop with him and we let the long procession go by, while we looked on and around the clearing. On all sides were thick forests of pine, but in the open was much tilled land in which grew a long-leafed tall plant which I did not recognize, and after some difficulty secured the name of Teocentli for it.

The grain obtained from this plant grows upon pithy spindles, sheathed in tender leaf wrappings. Each kernel is a dozen times the size of wheat and when ground produces an excellent meal for baking, though it is good in many other preparations and is the staple cereal of the country. The civilization of the country is based upon it, for without its great yield from few seed, the enormous slave population along the broad river basins could not be fed, and this civilization depended upon slavery.

You will find seed of it among the goods I am sending. It is beyond doubt easier to reap, mill and cook in many ways, than our other varieties of corn, such as wheat, rye, and barley.

The commander pointed out another field of coarse, rank, broad-leafed weed and made signs that it was very good, rubbing his stomach and exhaling deeply, but in what manner it was used I could not then imagine. Little as it may seem possible, these people dry this herb, crumble it into little stone cups attached to a reed mouthpiece and set fire to it, sucking in the aromatic vapors at the mouth and breathing them out through the nostrils!

This has a medicinal effect and produces

a giddiness and sickness in the neophyte, which after some time is followed by a general feeling of exhilaration, like a stomach full of mild wine. Among the savager peoples of this country, the practise is wide-spread and they will not open a council or consider an important matter without first blowing puffs of smoke to the four corners of the earth and going through a complicated and somewhat unnecessary ritual, to cause good spirits to favor their enterprises.

The folk I had fallen in with, however, have progressed beyond such crude superstitions, worshipping only three major gods, typifying Sun, Earth and Water, and smoke the herbs for its virtues only.

SEEING that I was anxious to learn, Hayonwatha pointed out in his soft speech various individuals as they passed by, naming them:

"Chippeway, Yamasee, Otali, Nashee, Shawano"—with many another nation, and as they passed, with leisure to look closely, I could see differences of coloration and weapon embellishment.

Then waving his arm broadly to include all the varied nationalities, he said, "Tlapallicos!" and fell into a glum, brooding mood, as though the thought irritated him.

I tapped him on the breast. "Tlapallico?" I queried.

He started, his eyes flashed and his strong right hand fell to his belted hatchet.

"Onondagaono!" he exclaimed, and struck his breast as though deeply insulted. Then he smiled and repeated, "Onondaga! Onondaga!" twice, to be certain I should not again fall into error, but left off the suffix "ono" which I inferred to apply to tribe, clan or race and not to an individual.

I pointed to my fellows and said "Romans," which he repeated several times to fix the word in his memory.

"Tlapallicos?" I questioned, pointing at some prisoners, mostly wounded, who followed under guard at the tail of the procession.

"Calusas!" he growled and spat on one as he passed, to indicate his contempt. "Chichamecs!"

As I might remark, "Saxons — barbarians!"

Yet it is against these natives of the region, and their neighbors, the Carankawas, that the Tlapallicos, semi-civilized and disciplined to ferocity as they were, must sally or protect themselves in camp by walls of mounded earth spined high with a pointed log palisade.

The procession passed and we followed across the clearing; up the earthwork ramp, through a gate in the palisade, and we had entered Fort Chipam. Within the enclosure were a large number of huts, mostly flimsy constructions of wattled reeds smeared with mud, but some of pole frameworks erected over a sunken floor below the ground level, the whole sheathed with broad pieces of bark or the hides of animals.

At the exact center stood two log structures, one small, one large. The small one was the commander's dwelling, and the large one, with doors and windows that could be barred and made tight, the prison of the fort.

We were urged within. "Weik-waum," said Hayonwatha, and the openings were made fast. Here the fifty of us spent the night, receiving rations a little before dark, deer and bear meat cooked into a tasty stew with the yellow kernels of teocentli, and small black beans. It was good and plentiful and afterward some of us slept, but I could not, nor Myrdhinn.

During most of the night we peered out of the barred windows at the scene on the parade ground where the captive Calusas were being put to death to appease the manes of those Tlapallicos slain in the day's battle.

Mutilated, burned and scalped, they

died to a man chanting defiance to their captors, and days later I saw their skulls set high on the pointed palisade to warn lurking forest spies that a like fate awaited any who dared resist the power of this farthest-flung fort of the mighty empire we had reached.

"Hue-hue-Tlapallan," Hayonwatha later named it to me. "The old-old-red-land!"

And red it was, every inch of it; red in soil, in habits, in spirit, drenched in blood, its altars reeking, its priests stinking with gore; ruddy the foliage of its northern boundaries, ruddy the ground where we lay and all along its southern marches.

The very thoughts of its people were tinged with red, their desires and dreams more ruddy than the color of their hides.

The sun that night tinged all the enclosure, staining huts and houses; the ramps on the red earth mounds, the firing-platforms of red pine — all took on a bloodier hue, which was retained after sunset by the leaping flames that consumed the enemies of that sun's worshippers.

Had we known more, we might have taken this as an omen affecting our further life in this cruel land.

### 8. *How Naughty Children Were Frightened in Samothrace*

EARLY in the morning, talking outside brought us to the bars again where we saw several passing men, lightly dressed but well armed, equipped to run or fight.

We watched them as they were let out of the north gate and through the opening, saw them look about warily and enter the forest, separating there, and guessed them to be runners sent to apprise some monarch of our entry into his land.

Obviously these people held the outer barbarians in deep respect, for some time after the last man had gone, a squad of men loitered near the gate on the chance that one might return closely pursued.

But nothing of the sort occurred, and after the fog and chill of the dawn had given way to warmth and after we had been fed, the guard returned to their quarters, leaving only two pacing sentinels on each firing-platform on the four walls, and high above them a stationary watcher, perched on a tower built above a mound between the prison and the commander's house.

Every hour, all day long, this sentry was relieved by another, and only once in the forty days we spent at this fort did we see any relaxation in vigilance or discipline.

Men were constantly leaving or entering the fort in parties of various numbers, but never less than four. Sometimes they brought wicker baskets of fish, both of the fresh and salt varieties; sometimes deer, black or brown bear, grown fat as swine on the berries with which these forests abound.

Often large birds were brought in, most succulent, bronze-feathered, red-wattled and strange to see, besides other species which we recognized—doves, geese, ducks, cranes, grouse, pheasants and many similar edibles.

And all day long baskets of salt came in and were stored away with the care befitting a great treasure, to protect which, this fort had been erected.

The country abounds in all things necessary for good living. I have seen doves flying in flocks that hid the sun, so many that three days did not bring the end of the flock; while a man might enter the woods as they slept at night and not trouble himself to be cautious or even burden himself with a stick to knock them down, but pluck them from the trees and bushes for the stretching forth of a hand! And in the morning we would find every green thing gone from the wood as though it had been smitten with a blight overnight.

A rich and fertile country it is that I hold for you, my Emperor!

At this time, however, none of us expected much besides the day's food, living in uncertainty and dread as to when the runners might return and what orders they would bring.

So a week went by with no change in our surroundings or habits, except that we had been given back our clothing (but no armor), and a doctor had treated Myrdhinn's gashed lips, my arm wound, and divers others of us that had suffered some small injury at the time of the wreck. One man in particular this doctor treated in a manner that should interest Roman physicians as much as it did me.

The second day of our captivity, he complained of head pains, later groaning and crying out in torment, while the next day he looked at us with fever-brilliant eyes, recognizing no one.

Myrdhinn could not help him and we gave him up for dead, but this doctor of whom I speak came to see him, and while a younger man (his son, I believe) looked on with interest, our companion was given dry leaves to chew and the doctor took some himself.

Then, with one of our company seated upon each arm and leg of our fellow to hold him steady, the doctor began his work.

First, with a razor-sharp knife of obsidian glass, which is here called itztli, he laid back a portion of the scalp, exposing the bone beneath, spitting juice from his own leaves upon the wound. Then he removed part of the bone, which, as we all could see, had been cracked and was pressing upon the brain. Working swiftly, he removed all specks of bone with shell tweezers, rounded the edges of the hole, smearing them with spittle, deftly cut a piece of thick sea-shell to fit and clapped it over the opening.

Straightway he applied more spittle, sewed up the scalp flap with sinew and bade us by signs to keep the man under restraint, which we did for two days, binding him face down upon a wooden pallet which they brought us, after which time he became sensible and could be trusted to care for himself, though still very sick.

Now the odd thing is this: although he suffered during the operation, yet his pain was almost annulled by the application of this spittle and by the effects of the juice he must have swallowed from his own cud.

Therefore I send you all these leaves I have been able to collect, they being rare and most precious, brought to us with difficulty and hardship from unfriendly lands far to the south, and hope that when they are before your learned men, they may be recognized and similar plants found in Europe.

AFTER we had been incarcerated for a week, though more as respected prisoners of war than slaves or enemies, I was called and conducted to the commander's weik-waum.

Here we set about the business of mutual communication, and as we both were anxious to learn, at the end of the month we could exchange enough words in his own speech to get one another's meaning. Myrdhinn was also admitted to these lessons and learned far quicker than I, and in turn we instructed our companions.

In these talks we learned much which may well be set down here, the swift course of following events being understood all the better for the present interruption, although you should realize that I myself did not know all of these things for many years.

The country then, where we dwell, is named Alata, as upon the map which I enclose, you will see it drawn, partly from observation and a good deal by reports from the native traders who cover vast distances on foot and water, there being no

other means of travel anywhere in the whole land.

Far to the north lies an inland sea of fresh water and here live savage tribes, as also along the ocean seaboard. These speak many languages and war among one another, being utter barbarians and are termed generally Chichamecs—their country, Chicameca—in disregard for whatever they may call themselves.

To the west, broad plains and valleys and gently rolling hills, likewise inhabited by wandering tribes, extend to the very edge of the world, which is marked by a titanic range of mountains not to be crossed by man, for they extend upward beyond the reaches of breathable air.

Southerly lies a hot and steaming land, by name Atala, lush with vegetation, uncomfortably moist, the homeland of the Mias, the ruling class of the country of Tlapallan. From this place they moved northward, settling in the fertile interior valleys where the great rivers run, providing transportation and furnishing much tillable land for the practise of agriculture.

Here they expanded and throve, driving out the original inhabitants into the forests to lead a savage existence, where they became great hunters and warriors and were feared by the Tlapallicos and Mias.

Studded thickly along the borders of Tlapallan, more especially to the north, northeast and east, lies a long chain of forts, heavily manned, constantly ready for attack, holding all the main rivers which are the thoroughfares of this country. There are well-beaten paths through the forests and the mountain ranges, where the passes are likewise held by forts and the heights are constantly patrolled by the men stationed there.

These soldiers hold the Chichamecs in deep dread and some contempt—dread of their fighting-ability, and contempt of their arms and education; for the soldiers spring from the same stock as their attackers and those defending the marches of Tlapallan are but one step removed from the would-be invaders.

Their system of slavery is this. A woman or man after capture is at once a slave. There is no appeal, no exchange of prisoners, no manumission. Neither is there any chance of escape, since the prisoner is hurried inland at once. Then, lost among the teeming myriads of Tlapallan, the captive becomes a beast of burden, toiling from dawn to dusk in the fields, fishing in the rivers under close surveillance, or working upon one of the numerous mounds of earth (sometimes over a hundred feet in height and covering acres of ground), in the form of pyramids, of animals, geometrical designs in the form of hollow enclosures, or simple barrows to provide work for idle hands.

These many forms of mounds and designs are the chief pride and distinguishing mark of Tlapallan from other lands. Almost everything these people do concerns a mound in some way.

The ramparts of the forts are earth, with a palisade on top. The rich river borders are knobbed with mounds, upon which the people seek shelter at a time of sudden flooding of the alluvial lands, for these mighty rivers are apt to overflow their banks or change their course overnight. Other mounds cover the bones of illustrious dead and these are huge. I was told that one alone had taken fifty years to erect, using the labor of two thousand slaves, in such times as they could be spared from the tilling of the fields.

Two people lie buried in this mound, but that was long ago and no one now remembers their names or anything of their history!

NO SUCH burial is given to the slaves. *They* erect the mounds where the temples are built, *they* see the watch-fires flame night and day, always tended, ex-

tinguished but once a year to be immediately relit, but they have only one share in the worship.

After they have grown old and feeble, their days of work done, having been transformed from valuable pieces of property into worthless mouths open for corn, they climb again those temple mounds their sweat and tears have salted and are savagely done to death upon the altars there to the glory of their captors' cruel gods.

Their children's fate is different. Torn from their parents at the earliest possible time, the young Chichamecs are educated according to the harsh principles of Tlapallan. Deprived of love and affection from birth, they grow stern and cruel. Most boys become soldiers, those of much promise being educated especially for positions of power, but the dull child or the cripple goes the way of his parents and may toil years later with earth-laden basket up some high mound and meet an aged crone tottering down, not knowing her to be his mother—or be in the throng below the temple when the high priest above, in the last rays of the setting sun, holds up his father's still throbbing heart to coax their departing god back again from his dark lair.

But however hard this stupid one's toil, however difficult and hungry the days, he has a hope his parents never knew. The son of slave parents, by any whim of his master, may be made free, take up land for himself and become a small freeholder of Tlapallan, living in hopes that his son in turn, third remove from the forest life, may become a merchant, a trader in obsidian, wrought metal, or paints to embellish the bodies of the Chichamecs—his cousins.

If so, this trader brings back all manner of precious things; furs, pearls, rare featherwork, gold or silver, unless indeed he be slain by those haughty, untamed people, as a true son of Tlapallan!

Although the coloration of the skin, the contour of the features and the proud, cruel expression of all the races are very similar, a Mia may be readily distinguished from a Tlapallico by reason of the skull's shape. Shortly after birth, a Mian baby has a small board bound tightly to his head, both front and back, compressing the soft bone until the skull finally assumes a conical shape, sometimes ridged along the top of the head like a bird's crest, but often rising to a peak.

This renders it impossible for a slave to ever masquerade as one of the ruling class, nor can he intermarry among them.

Hayonwatha was of the second generation, bred to war, but by the odd mistake of his own mother having been accidentally chosen as his nurse, he had learned something of forbidden mother love and, deprived of it early, had nursed all his life since, a bitter hate for Tlapallan and the sons of slaves which made up in great part the common soldiery and garrisons of the forts. It was this rankling bile that showed strongly in his voice when he named to me on the march the tribes of various individuals as they passed before us—tribes of which those various individuals themselves were ignorant, being placed to defend forts far from their homelands, that they might remain ignorant of their own people and feel themselves as strangers in a hostile land, with their only friends their fellow soldiers and every tribesman, in the forest round about, their enemy.

So the individual lost his identity and became a Tlapallico, a citizen of Tlapallan, except in a few cases such as that of Hayonwatha when he, in a moment of crazy pride before a stranger to whom he owed his life and who he knew could not understand, denied his birthright of citizenship and called himself "Onondaga" after his mother's people, far north along the shores of the Inland Sea.

All this Hayonwatha explained fully, in private talk with myself and Myrdhinn, and told us how the Mias had fought their

way up from the southwest where no forts were now needed, a desert country of poison wells and springs separating the borders of Tlapallan from the nearest large tribes of civilized people. He told us how the Tlapallicos raided across these Debatable Lands, having maps of the sweet waters on their lines of march, and brought back prisoners who were prized for their skill in featherwork and blanket weaving.

Also he told us that some of the various barbarian tribes looked to the southwest as their final resting-place, it being said that from these regions all men had come, and they regarded this as the terrestrial Paradise. Therefore, to the southwest their heads were directed when they were buried, lying face up with their valuables and their weapons around them, so that they might prosper and defend themselves in the Land of the Dead.

ALL this interested Myrdhinn greatly, for to him it seemed that this earthly Paradise might be the very Garden of Eden from whence all men sprang, and he could hardly contain himself with anxiety to be free and searching for this Land of the Blest, and also worrying for fear that we would never be permitted.

I do not know how many times he told me of various faiths and religions known to him which held that Paradise was in some mystical Western Land, or how often he dinned into my ears the fact that we had sailed southwest to reach this peculiar country.

He was genuinely interested and hag-ridden with this thought, and night after night when others were sleeping, I watched him at our barred windows, scanning the stars for some phenomenon which would indicate a favorable end to our imprisonment.

But the stars were uncommunicative and disappointed him, some even being strange to us and not the same as in Britain, which suggested to me that possibly Myrdhinn's magic and divinations would not avail us in this land of Alata — its gods being against us.

Myrdhinn smiled at this and said that though divinations were obscure, his magic was powerful anywhere, resting upon basic facts of truth, unchangeable anywhere on earth, most of his feats depending upon earthy materials common to anyone, supposing them to have the knowledge to perceive and extract the virtues within.

"Give me," he said, "my books, my materials, and I could get us all out of here with white magic; but what can I do as I am, being stripped of all but my robes?"

"Black magic!" said I. "Use that. The worthy end justifies the dirty tools."

Myrdhinn shook his head.

"Aye, black magic would avail. I could blast this fort with a spell, and imperil my mortal soul in doing it, but I have taken too many trips along the murky borders of Hell! Long ago, I saw too much and was warned by it. Never again will I use black magic except as a last resort which must be worth the peril involved. Yet, lest you doubt that I have powers at my beck which can protect us—watch well from the window and be not afraid, for this is neither white nor black magic, but a simple thing that once all Samothrace knew and elders there frighted unruly children by it."

He went to the window and chirped into his beard, and suddenly from the half-dark a flittermouse came flapping. It clung to the bars and eyed us all, and Myrdhinn with a forefinger stroked its silky back, chirping—and the little creature chirped in response!

All in a twink it was gone, and Myrdhinn raised his arm.

"Watch!" he said, "and be still!"

Round the sleeping fort flew the flittermouse, round and round again, three times

in all, flying widdershins, and vanished again.

Then Myrdhinn dropped his arm and stood listening.

"Do you hear it?" he said.

I shook my head. All was as it had been, save that a light breeze had begun to blow.

I said as much, and Myrdhinn chuckled. "A breeze? Listen."

The breeze became a stiff wind, increasing to a gale which buffeted our stout prison and made the timbers creak.

Cries rose from the soldiers' quarters, as the light huts and tents blew over and exposed the sleepers to the stars.

Still the gale increased. All of the prisoners were now awake. Our prison shook and trembled. In the forest we could hear the crash of falling trees. We were forced to shout to one another to be heard, then could no longer do that. And still the tremendous wind swept the fort like a besom, piling the loose flimsy wreckage of the weik-waums against the southern palisade.

Suddenly we saw overhead the black sky and the aloof stars, and caught a glimpse of our roof flitting away before hearing the crash of it on the parade ground and smelled the smoke where embers of campfires had been whipped against our log walls.

"Stop it!" I screamed to Myrdhinn. "You will kill us all!"

Myrdhinn raised his arm and all at once there was no more wind.

Now we could hear a multitudinous groaning and lament from the injured, followed by a mighty flare of light. The wreckage against the palisade was flaming, driving back the night, and our hut wall burst into furious tongues of fire, licking up our door and surging past the window near it.

On one another's shoulders we got over the wall and looked around at the damage. Myrdhinn's "little spell to fright naughty children" had done its work well.

The whole enclosure was bare of huts. Here and there staggered injured men, carrying or aiding others. Fully a third were dead and none save ourselves, incarcerated in the strongest building in the fort, were entirely without scathe.

The watch tower was down and crashed through the commander's quarters, though I saw him limping about, trying to restore order.

The palisade was burning furiously, and so stupefied with calamity was the camp that it burned on unheeded. Had the Chichamecs struck then we would all have been killed.

Weapons, provisions, trade goods were inextricably mixed into the mass of burning wreckage, and only a few things, among them our gear, had escaped (having been placed in a root-cellar beneath the commander's dwelling), though the building above was ruined.

Myrdhinn turned to me.

"Will Druid lore work in Alata, Ventidius?"

I had no words to deny it.

### 9. *Kukulcan*

THE remarkable discipline of this people was quickly manifested after the first shock had worn away. Crackling orders from the commander started the work of salvage, and before sunrise the fires had been extinguished, the wreckage searched for weapons, valuables, and everything else which could be saved.

For my share, as commander of my party, I had given orders that we help wherever possible, thinking that a show of good will might help us all, even as my help to Hayonwatha had resulted in friendship and personal favors.

This, although a further usurpation of Myrdhinn's authority, aroused no antagonism in him, he heartily agreeing; and I

thought he seemed secretly relieved that I had taken command, for he had no liking for the duties of war, though he had fought in Britain.

We offered our help in caring for the wounded and soon had them segregated in our former prison with Nicanor, a legionary with some knowledge of medicine, and Myrdhinn in charge, until the physician of the fort relieved them.

During this work we had come across the pit in which lay our gear, and in the confusion we managed to arm ourselves with bow and buckler, sword and dagger. Thus arrayed we marched to the commander.

"Sir," I announced, "receive us as friends and allies in this emergency, I pray. You are in dire peril from the forest men. We will hold the breach until the palisade be rebuilt."

Hayonwatha looked at us strangely.

"Do you understand what you are doing, Atoharo? You could easily escape. We could not prevent you now."

I laughed.

"Whither should we go? Flee to the Chichamecs? Nay, let us earn our freedom by proving ourselves friends. Give us the post of danger and if the barbarians attack you shall see how white men fight."

Again that odd look.

"Let it be so. I have warned you. If you choose to stay, we value the aid you bring. Whatever may arise, this day makes us truly brothers. Count upon my future help in anything I can do. But remember, your freedom depends not upon me, but upon Kukulcan!"

So I told off twenty who marched to the smoking ruins and stood guard, scanning the forest. The rest of us donned full armor, and other twenty relieved the guards, who did likewise, and afterward we scattered along the walls, each with bow and quiver ready.

For the time being, the fort was ours, as peculiar a twist of fortune conceivable to anyone. Would we had profited by it!

Just after sunrise, runners went out, scattering in the forest, and by midday a detachment from Fort Wiatosa, our nearest neighbor, came in on the double, heavily armed guards and baggage-laden slaves who struggled along panting and spent.

Then you might have seen those copper-colored warriors scramble for atlatl and darts, lances and javelins, bone and flint and shell knives, and again properly armed, go strutting, feeling themselves men of valor. As their elation increased, our spirits went down.

Sentinels came up and replaced us on mound and parapet, and we formed ranks on the parade ground and waited.

Soon Hayonwatha approached, in a group of his chief officers. We watched them tensely. What would be the orders? Behind me, the men murmured. Would it be prison again? Sooner than that, they would fight, as I well knew.

Myrdhinn and Nicanor came running from the prison to listen. I stepped forward five paces, unbuckled sword and scabbard and held them out. Hayonwatha raised his hand in dignified refusal.

"Replace your weapon, Atoharo. This day has earned you a place among us. Let us be as one people, with no talk of prisoner and captor, until I receive the orders for which I sent upon your arrival. Receive also this token of our friendship."

An officer handed him a necklace similar to that which he wore; many-stranded, glittering with pearls, elk and bear teeth, gold and mica beads. I removed my helmet and the commander placed the costly thing around my neck.

I saluted. Myrdhinn went back to the hospital, smiling in his beard, and our company disbanded.

That evening was one of merriment, for not a man, whether of Tlapallan or Britain, but felt better with the feel of weapons at

his side, and if our former captors swaggered, think then of us, far longer deprived of the touch of good steel and trusty bow!

And imagine us striding like gods on earth, glittering and jingling among the many campfires, welcome at any, the heroes of the day—and the man, Myrdhinn, to whom we owed it all, discreetly in the background, handsomely robed, quietly observing, scheming, considering the future and the stars.

It is no part of this story to detail how, in the following days, we amazed these fighting-men with our bows, whose deadly precision they beheld for the first time in their lives. I warned my men to be careful to keep a loose string, in order that the full power of the bow might not be manifested, and by no means to shoot beyond the farthest range of the atlatl—thus not displaying our greatest strength and keeping secret our reserves.

Also when they wished to make bows and emulate our weapons, we carefully selected only moderately desirable woods, and were none too particular in showing them the correct grip and finger release.

After a while they went back to their atlatls, satisfied that they were our equals in distance, if not quite so in precision, which was what we had intended.

Together, bands of my men and bands of the Tlapallicos mingled in the forest, where their slingers competed with ours in the hunting of small game, and beat us roundly too.

We visited Fort Wiatosa, and found it identical with Fort Chipam; went a-fishing and saw again the wrecked "Prydwen," the stern lying ten feet under, glittering and beautiful, though a ruin that made us grieve for her past splendor.

Belatedly the Chichamecs learned of the damage done to the fort, long after its repairing, and they hurled themselves upon us in utter disregard for singing arrows and darts and forced an entry, only to die on steel and stone, the survivors seeking the forest again like wounded bears who slowly back away, growling horridly and licking their wounds, but not beaten or daunted.

One morning, nearly two months after our arrival, the vigilant watcher in the tower signaled that there was movement in the forest. Soon a troop of a hundred armed men marched into the clearing, formed in columns of fours and hailed the fort.

The gates opened at once and they marched in, their officer presenting a belt of beadwork, as credentials, to Hayonwatha. This announced the bearer as the new commander, and his orders were that two thirds of the former garrison, under Hayonwatha, be detailed to guard us on our way to the capital of Tlapallan.

I did not know this and was surprised to find Hayonwatha surly and curt, for to me he had not been the stern hard-bitten commander with which his men were familiar. Nor could I learn much from him, his attitude showing that secret orders had changed our relationship.

"At least," I said, somewhat nettled, "you may tell us whither we are to go, if you cannot tell me what is to be our fate."

"You march at daybreak. We go to Kukulcan. You are to be judged."

"Who or what is Kukulcan?"

He did not seem to hear me, but sat on his bench with his head in his hands, and in a tone of uttermost despair, repeated:

"Kukulcan! Kukulcan!"

So I left, wondering greatly, for whether Kukulcan might be a city, a country, or a ruler's name, I had not the least idea.

### *10. The City of the Snake*

THERE was the tingle of frost in the air as we set out the following morning. Autumnal days were rapidly approach-

ing and as we marched on northwesterly, following well-marked and hard-beaten paths, worn a foot or more below the surface of the forest mold, we began to feel the chill and were glad of night shelter.

This comfort we found at forts. Night followed night, but always during the waning daylight we arrived at yet another in this gigantic scheme of mounded fortifications which protects the long frontiers of Tlapallan from invasion. Though connected by no Wall of Hadrian, this system was fully as efficient as Britain's, at this time, for the Mias had no organized attack to fear. The Chichamecs were always at war among themselves, being split up into many tribes, with various languages and dialects, though strangers managed to talk with some ease by movements of the hands.

From one fort to another we were passed along, supplied with food, laden with goods to carry on; pipe bowls from the stone-carvers, hides from the trappers and hunters, jewelry and loose pearls from the creek fishers. And as we were routed by the great mica mines in a near-by range of mountains, men were attached to our procession who carried, on litters soft with grass, closely wrapped disks and slabs of mica, beautifully polished and worked.

Some of these were three feet across, intended for mirrors to embellish some noble's home, for riding on the backs of the lesser peoples were three distinct classes of noble folk, descendants of the old Mias and fit for nothing but to oppress and persecute.

With the addition, as we pushed northward, of slaves and their attendant guards, our array reached the final total of near three hundred, a monstrous tax upon the provisions of the forts at which we rested. Finally our original party split away from the later accretions who were to follow as a separate band, and we went on rapidly, having nothing to carry but our own armor and gear though the slaves with us labored under heavy loads of metal from the "Prydwen". In all this time, we had been permitted to keep our weapons and this gave us cheer and set our fears at ease.

Colder, shorter and more dreary grew the days. Occasionally a light sifting of snow whitened the ground during the night, and at last were given stout braccæ of deerhide to wear and slept in bearskins quite comfortably.

Over mountains, into and out of valleys, fording streams or ferrying them, we marched through the forest country, passing across such broad expanses of tree-covered lands, that Anderida, Britain's mightiest wood, with all its goblin-haunted ruins, could have been dropped into one of these immense valley plains and totally lost. At one time we traveled up a wide stream more than a hundred miles in coracles made of bark, and in all that distance saw from the water no natural openings in the crowding trees, and no smoke or other signs of humanity, except as we neared the forts which kept this watery highway safe for Tlapallan's citizens.

We grew thin and muscular, never really hungry or satisfied, and at long last arrived at a river, immensely broad, and were supplied (at a fort, of course) with sufficient craft to take us to our journey's end, and were told that our forest marches were behind us.

Our paths had been made easy for us, and we moved through this almost trackless wilderness as a post-rider might confidently ride the highways of Rome, sure of a change of horses as needed or a place to lay his head or a relief to take and carry on his message.

We white men learned to respect the manner in which the country was managed, especially when we saw the large number of coracles that rocked in the shallow cove on the morning of our embarkation.

"Ohion," Hayonwatha named this river.

"Yonder, upstream, several days journey—lies the City of the Snake and Kukulcan."

WE SPLASHED through the tinkling ice fringe and pushed out into the deep water. Vigilant scouts shot ahead, and more slowly we commenced the final step of our long journey.

At times we saw creatures drinking unalarmed; wolves, bear, large wild cattle with humped backs, shaggy hair and short sharp horns.

Again we saw giant elk, broad-antlered, or the maneless lion who preys upon these creatures, long tail switching as he snarled at us glaring his hate before bounding into the forest.

We now observed among these far stretches of timber, maple, oak, birch, beech and pine, leafage mostly seared by frost, some few yet violently scarlet, and were offered at our resting-places, nuts of kinds that were strange, yet very sweet and good, with dessert to follow of the smoky-tasting wild grapes which abound everywhere.

A rich land, my Emperor, running over with riches for its owners!

At last the forests fell away, for we had left the frontiers behind us. Clearings showed along the river banks, each with its mounds, its fort, its tilled lands, and many, many servile people who eyed our white skins with dull, stupid curiosity, until the whips cracked over their own scarred backs.

Then with hardly a glint of rebellion in their black eyes, they took up their burdens, building more mounds or making higher those already built.

Clearings broadened into meadows and moorland, forts became enclosed towns or cities defended by citadels, all without any stonework, done in heaped earth walls crowned by palisades, yet quite impregnable against any force that existed to menace them.

One day we left this Ohion, and entered a tributary stream. Not long after we arrived at the chief, though not the largest city of Tlapallan. It was the impressive and bloodstained City of the Snake.

In progressing up the nobler river we had observed smoke pillars rising ahead of us, their columns broken into long and short puffs, and were told by our friends that word was going on ahead that we were coming, from village to village.

Along the lesser tributary, we noticed that the centers of population were undefended by fortified enclosures, and concluded that we had arrived at a point where danger from barbarians was improbable. Now we decided that we were wrong, for we saw a long mound wall stretching along a narrow ridge at the junction of a small river with that which we were following alongshore.

As we first caught sight of it, we were struck with its resemblance to a serpent, the image being greater than any serpent that ever crawled, for it extended fully a quarter-mile. If the far-flung loops of its undulations, which formed fort-like enclosures, had been straightened, it would have been much longer.

The body itself is thirty feet across, though only the height of a tall man above the ground level. In its enclosures, all the people, in the unprotected communities up and down the little rivers, could find shelter in case of invasion. The tail was near one stream, its head near another, and upon its back were built log houses, connected by palisades, in order to form a continuous wall at all points not less than twenty feet high. At the three gates were fortified outworks, almost impregnable.

As we marched along the outside of this imposing fortress, we saw every available spot, upon roof or palisade, filled with people. They watched us, but there was no word of welcome, nor did they follow along the wall, but remained where they

were until we were out of sight. This chill greeting seemed ominous.

The feeling was not lessened when, at Hayonwatha's command, the Tlapallicos took up a position to the right and left of each of us. In a column of threes we approached the gateway at the Serpent's jaws. These were widely spread, and beyond the outworks we could see another mound, oval in shape, crowned with a roof or pavilion of logs, and noticed that another pair of jaws at its opposite end opened to surround this oval completely, though the head of the other snake was bodiless; as the river, which flowed near by, interfered with any extension of the earthworks.

Not knowing whether we were prisoners or honored guests, we fifty Romans approached the gates, wide flung and waiting. One hundred feet from the entrance, our long column halted. The company trumpeter sounded his shell trumpet, and with measured stride a procession came forward to meet us.

Company upon company of fighting-men, they met us and split to left and right, impassively taking their places. We were surrounded!

That foreboding of mine grew stronger, and I quietly passed the word down my line, to be ready for trouble. I heard behind me the snick of steel in sheath, the thrum of bows being strung taut, the rattle of arrows, and felt easier.

We might be doomed, but we would die bravely, I thought.

Slaves bore a litter through the gate, and we saw reclining upon it a grossly obese man, middle-aged and cruel of countenance.

Physically he was a giant, for when standing, he was nearly eight feet in height, and at one time he was the champion of his race. The solid copper antlers upon his head made him look much taller, though creeping age and vices had blurred the originally fine lines of the face and body. As a scepter, he carried a finely worked spear, the copper head of which weighed more than a woodcutter's ax.

His robe, we were later told, was woven of human hair!

Spear butts thudded in salute. Hayonwatha murmured "Kukulcan!" All the red men bowed low in servile salutation.

Then Hayonwatha touched Myrdhinn's arm and led him forward to the litter, where he sank to his knees and bowed his forehead to the ground. Myrdhinn proudly stepped back, and the monarch's face purpled.

Instantly, slaves leaped upon Myrdhinn, tore the robes off him and hurled him to the ground. I turned to my men, felt a tremendous blow, and reeling, saw my comrades falling from blows from left and right, heard the armed men rushing, closing in, leaping upon us!

With that picture before my eyes, the war-cries of friend and foe ringing loud, I felt the warm blood running down my back beneath my armor and the grit of dirt in my mouth. "This is Death!" I thought. In my mind I cursed the false friend who had pretended to be my blood brother in order to trap us more completely. I knew myself trodden upon, but felt no pain from kick or blow, just a sensation of earth opened beneath me, and myself falling into the abyss.

### *11. The Snake—and the Egg*

THE next I remember, I lay in utter darkness. Beneath me was a puddle of cold water. I tried to roll out of it and heard groans. I was conscious enough to know that the groans were my own and then I must have swooned again, for without any apparent interval of time, it was light and I could see. But it was not the light of day, nor the good sweet air of upper earth.

Like moles we lay, I and my men. They huddled dispiritedly by themselves while other groups of prisoners, copper-colored folk, kept also to themselves, though casting curious glances at us. Stark naked, all of us, shivering with cold in the dank air, winter close at hand. I wondered as I lay there if this was the mode of execution we were to expect.

Distant noises, and my aching eyes focussed properly upon a glare of torches, which shone through a grille of stout oak bars laid transversely across the entrance to this large underground chamber. Then as these bars were removed, an officer and two guardsmen came in with torches, lighting up the place more clearly.

The officer passed among us with disdain. One could see that he regarded us as a farmer might his sheep. Without fear, he made the circuit of the walls, looking for evidences of digging.

Satisfied that no tunnels were under construction, he returned to the entrance, snapped orders, and slaves entered with steaming buckets, which they emptied into long troughs and retired.

The bars slid into place, the locking pins drove home and we were left in our den. Sickened by the sounds of feeding swine, where men fought and gobbled at the troughs, I rolled on my face in the water and hoped for death.

A kindly hand stroked my head and a kind voice said, "My poor friend!"

I rolled over again. It was Myrdhinn. Gaunt and bony, clothed only in his beard, he still retained his dignity.

"Rouse and eat. Gather strength and courage. This is not our end!"

Then I first saw who stood by him. Hayonwatha who had led us into this trap —my blood brother!

"Traitor! Judas!" I croaked and tried to raise myself to strike him down, but was too weak to throw off Myrdhinn's restraining hand.

"Eat!" he repeated. "Our friend is prisoner and condemned to death with us. We will explain while you regain strength. Trust him as true man, for his future is tied with ours."

And so, trusting Myrdhinn at least, I ate thick stew of corn and beans from the cupped hands of Hayonwatha, whom I wished to kill, and reclined on my elbow, listening, feeling the good food bring back life, and my aching head throb less mightily.

I learned that law among these barbarians was rigidly followed, its transgressors punished by death, its ironbound code unchangeable in the slightest degree. This code ordering that prisoners should be brought in, bound, naked and unarmed, had been wantonly broken by our coming —free, clothed and armed!

Hayonwatha, who had conceived that because we had gained *his* friendship we should be treated as friends, was bitterly astonished to see the treatment meted out to Myrdhinn.

MYRDHINN had brought it upon himself by his refusal to demean himself before one whom he considered an inferior, but whom these people considered a deity incarnate, lord of sea, sky and earth.

By giving us kind treatment, Hayonwatha had forfeited his precarious citizenship (being of the second generation), and with him all his men, because they had not risen to strip him of his office and ask for a new commander. This word had gone ahead of us by smoke pillars, and unknowing we marched toward a planned doom, though Hayonwatha had suspected that trouble was coming when the garrison of the fort was replaced. His orders were to bring us in as prisoners, and for that reason his men had formed to seize us without injury, without knowing *they* were to be prisoned with us.

Here in the pit, for three days, while I had lain unconscious, my men and Hayonwatha's had been at odds, but the fight was about worked out of both factions and apathy had set in, for there was little hope for escape and a grisly end in view for all of us.

"So you see, Ventidius," said Myrdhinn, "that he really did more for us than we had any right to expect, and his own friendliness has brought him misery such as ours."

I tried a smile. It hurt. I took Hayonwatha's hand.

"When I am more recovered we will see what we can do."

"We are friends, then?"

"Friends," I echoed. "Myrdhinn, order it to be so."

He stalked off, and through half-shut eyes I saw the groups intermingle. At least, I thought, if there is any escape, let us fight as one people. Then I became very sick and, I believe, delirious; not so much out of mind however, that I could not tell that the light from very high, small openings, was waning, or so much that I did not know when the food was brought again.

I heard Myrdhinn say, "Another gone." I roused from my torpor to see a Tlapallico dragged away by burly guards.

Out he went, fighting grimly, protesting while a good seven-score men stood by and watched him go without offering resistance. The bars sealed us in again, the light waned, it became almost completely dark in our miry pit.

Then far, far away, heard dimly through the many feet of earth above us, a roar of cheering fell and rose, and fell again; and with it came night and deeper cold and things which slithered and crawled over our shrinking bodies as we slept.

Such, repeated again and again, was to be a typical day of our life for many days to come.

"HERE," remarked Hayonwatha," is the river up which we came; here, Nachan the City of the Snake; and here is the Snake herself, Ciacoatl, the Devourer, the Earth-Mother, defender of the city by means of her own earthy body, being rampart and object of worship also."

We three leaders were squatted around a dry spot. Hayonwatha drew his finger along the dirt floor as he spoke.

"Such a monster should have a suitable mate," I said.

He looked up. "She has. About fifty miles away is her mate, situated properly to close off a bend of another river, in similar manner to Ciacoatl. They lie looking at each other across the land. His name is Mixcoatl, the Storm-Serpent, god of the water and the rain. A large city, Colhuacan, City of the Twisting Mound, is protected by his body. About ten miles up this river lies Miapan, the greatest citadel in all of Tlapallan, for in it sixty thousand people, with provisions and chattels, may find shelter in case of siege, while down the river is a fortified town, Tlacopan, shielding the people of the lower valley.

"These three strong places are the main strongholds of the Mias.

"Now, to the northeast, lies a great inland sea of fresh water, where are the hunting-grounds of my mother's people. It is not many days journey and if we could reach them, along this road where the miners travel from these four cities to the copper mines near the inland sea, I am convinced that we would be welcome.

"Through the uncounted moons these Mias have held the land of Tlapallan, they have driven back the Onondagaono, persecuted them, raided them for slaves and loot, but my people are still free and could they control their own fierceness and unite with their neighbors, they might meet and drive back any invasion."

"Who are these neighbors?" I queried.

"Once there was one people, fierce,

terrible fighters, independent and brave. They lived in this country before they were driven out by the superior strength of the trained and disciplined Mias. Moving north, they became hunters and fishermen, living wild in the woods in small communities. The struggle for life was hard and, losing touch with one another, various persons came to blows over the hunting, or women, and so factions were created. As time went on, these factions became separate nations who now agree on scarcely anything and are as ready to take one another's scalps as they are to take those of their real enemy, the Mias."

"How many nations do you reckon them?" asked Myrdhinn.

Hayonwatha checked them on his fingers.

"There are five powerful nations of the woods. First, the Onondagaono (Onondaga), my own people, strongest and bravest of all, then the Gwengwehono (Cayuga), the Nundawaono (Seneca), the Ganeagaono (Mohawk), and the Onayotekaono (Oneida)."

"Would they unite, think you?"

Hayonwatha chuckled grimly, his nearest approach to a laugh.

"Certainly—in death! Nothing else will unite them. Not even Tarenyawagon, the Master of Life, could do that!"

"Tarenyawagon? It is he whom you worship?"

But Hayonwatha, so loquacious on some subjects, was suddenly struck dumb, and brooding, he moved away and sat by himself, while we (understanding that we had unintentionally pried into a mystery) remained where we were and discussed the future.

From what he had told us, we knew that should we be able to escape we would be exchanging one dreadful fate for another, unless by our own prowess we might make ourselves so feared that we would be let alone in the forests where we must lead the lives of outlaws.

Among all these Chichamecan tribes, these five nations appeared to be the most intelligent, having kept their independence during their wild life without sacrificing everything else to the hunt for food, although their code of warfare, we were told, was no better than the very wildest of the painted prisoners we had seen in the many forts we had visited on our long journey.

The Mias fought to secure slaves. All their enemies fought for captives to torture, having no need of slaves in their system of living. The practises of the forest nations seemed to us bitter and unnecessarily cruel.

Each war party that set out tried to do the very utmost of injury to its enemy. Women and little children were butchered, and because of this fact these five nations, especially, were headed for mutual extermination.

Yet, as Hayonwatha explained the code, we could see that it was not without a rude sense. Each woman might fight or be a mother of fighters—ergo, each child might grow to be a fighter or a woman! They were killed, as warriors, for the killing of them was a powerful blow to the enemy. It helped to weaken his power and it struck, theoretically, terror to his heart.

But to us, it seemed that this element of terror was overrated, for the killing of a man's wife or child must naturally drive him ever after in a search for revenge. So the Chichamecans made themselves weaker and an easier prey to the slavers of Tlapallan.

Still, could we escape, our best haven was north, beyond the frontier, among Hayonwatha's people, where more than anywhere in Alata we might reasonably hope to make friends.

WE HAD learned that our deep prison lay under the Egg, held between the jaws of the Snake. Could we dig out, which was impossible owing to the rigid

daily inspection, we would come out among the buildings of the city or upon the level plain outside the rampart. In either event, we would be discovered, for so large a body of men could not escape the notice of the sentries.

There was a possibility that we might escape by the door had it not been continually guarded. We had rushed the log grille so many times that a whole company of guards accompanied the inspecting officer on his triple daily rounds, and most of us bore wounds from their spears.

None of my men had yet been taken above ground, but Hayonwatha's command had been reduced more than three score.

Each day, at sunrise, high noon and sunset, a man was selected and taken away. We heard the crowd roar and knew that he had been sacrificed to the Sun, but how we did not know, for the natives shuddered with horror when asked, and we did not press the argument, for the one we questioned might be the next to die.

Once I asked Myrdhinn to save us by sorcery, but he sadly refused. Below ground, he was out of touch with the powers of the air. Being stripped stark, he had no tools of magic, except a small cross which our captors had left him, as they had allowed the rest of us to keep amulets and rings, as personal ornaments of no value. Even Black Magic, he explained, depended upon certain materials, and here was absolutely nothing with which he could work.

So it seemed that we all must die, and we had become almost resigned to it, seeing comrades among the copper people taken away each day, the end seeming so inevitable that they scarcely resisted.

Above ground the year was waning. The light that seeped down to us was gray and sometimes there was snow on the furs of the inspector.

One night Myrdhinn called me to him, just after the food had been brought (food for my fifty and for ten of Hayonwatha's men, and now we knew we had been underground a full month and wondered for what dreadful purpose we whites were being saved until the last).

"Ventidius, can you tell me the day of the year?"

I laughed. The idea was ridiculous.

"I can. I have kept account of the days during all our wanderings. Pass the word among the men to join us in solemn celebration of the birth of our Lord. Although I am a sinful person, I am the only one among you who can perform the Christ's Mass. Therefore let us fast and spend the night in solemn thought, and let each man look into his heart and make himself ready for the greater life, for I think we shall not spend another night in this prison."

So we worshipped in the dark chamber, while our fellow prisoners looked on, trying to understand, and the guard beyond the grille commented scurrilously on our behavior, and during his remarks said something which Hayonwatha caught and remembered. So when we were finished, he hurried to me and said:

"Have you been preparing for death, Atoharo?"

"If it must be, my brother."

"It must. There is no doubt. Tomorrow is the Feast of the Sun!"

"What is to take place?"

"During tonight every fire in Tlapallan will be extinguished. Tomorrow is the shortest day of the year, the day when the Sun is most apt to leave us and never return. To prevent this, the H'menes, the wise men, command a great sacrifice in order that the Sun may smell the blood and delighting in it, may return to gladden the hearts of his worshippers.

"Tomorrow will be spent without fire on any hearth. In the morning there will be no sacrifices, nor at midday. Instead, the secret brotherhood of the Sh'tols will dance, beginning with an appeal to the Sun to re-

HAYONWATHA
ALATA
Kukulcan
INLAND SEA
MINER'S ROAD
COPPER MINES
NOROMBEGA
CHICHIMECA
SEA OF GRASS
HODENOSAUNEE
FOUR CITIES
TOWNS
RIVER'S ROUTE
DEBATABLE LANDS
AZTLAN
EDGE OF THE WORLD
ZLAPALLAN
FORT WIATOSA
FORT CHIPAM
HERE WE WERE WRECKED
TOLTECA
PIASA
BRANDON'S ISLE
TO ATALA
HOT LANDS
WANDERER'S JOURNEYS

main for another year, and then appealing to Mixcoatl and Ciacoatl to influence their fellow god.

"Then they will dance the dance of battle, lasting most of the day. There will be games of skill and blood to inure the Mian youth to gore, and to inspire them to become leaders of Tlapallan.

"Shortly after the sacrifices will begin. When the Sun touches the hills, the eldest H'mene will ignite with the Sastun, a magic crystal, a flame from which all others in the city will be relit. But we shall not see that!

"Today is our end!"

Myrdhinn said, "Never despair. We have another day."

But he would not say anything more to encourage us, and knowing that he could have no more hope than we, there was no cheer among us and we spent the night in meditation, self-communing and prayer.

In the morning, Myrdhinn, to the best of his remembrance, repeated the Mass. Our Host was coarse teocentli cake, our precious Drink was muddy water, from river seepage in a low hollow in our floor, but we felt spiritually encouraged and ready for our fate.

And our companions made ready to die, singing harsh tuneless chants, and combing and braiding one another's hair as well as might be without oil or any comb but their fingers.

Thus we waited, receiving no food, seeing no inspectors, during most of the day. We heard distantly the many noises of an assembled multitude and a continual thudding of drums; for all the scattered peoples of the valley had congregated in one or another of the four cities, though more had come here than elsewhere, this being the capital city and the religious center of Tlapallan.

In every village, town, city and fort, wherever the borders of Tlapallan extended, similar ceremonies were taking place and the "old, old red land" that night would be reddened in many ways!

### *12. Sacrifice—and Sorcery*

WE, DEEP in our dark pit, heard the accustomed tramp of sandaled feet and saw the grille black against the ruddy torchlight, like a barred entrance to Hell. The barrier was removed and we were beckoned forth singly. As we came out, each of us had his arms forced back and a clamp of wood was hooked around each upper arm.

These clamps were made all of one size, so that upon a large man, skin might be nipped in fastening, but on a youth they were loose. Each clamp was connected to its mate by an adjustable hair rope, which was drawn so tight as nearly to dislocate our shoulders and made every little motion painful.

They held our Marcus not too tightly, for he was slight as a girl, and at this I was gladdened, for we all liked him, being youngest of us all, and in a sense, our charge.

In this situation, filled with mingled satisfaction, pain and dread, we were hustled above, encouraged with kick and spear-butt, to stumble finally into daylight, where blinking and bewildered, we were greeted with a thunderous roar of voices.

We stood upon the top of the Egg!

All around us, people were thronged; on the ground below, packed thick along the palisades and roof tops, and thicker yet where the favored ones were closely pressing along the jaws and throat of the Snake. There fell a great silence.

In the center of the cleared top of the Egg was a pavilion without walls, so that we could look within and see a stone altar where were gathered certain high members of the nobility, their ruler the obese giant, Kukulcan, and the H'menes, or priests of the Sun.

From the H'menes, a horrid specter detached itself. It advanced, dancing, whirling in a flutter of feathers and strips of colored fur. Its body was painted black, with the bones of the skeleton outlined in red. It came closer still before we could be certain that it was true man and not some lich.

In his hands he shook rattles of human fingerbones strung upon cords, and about his waist he was cinctured with a belt from which hung and dangled the scalps of men, together with dried lumps of flesh that could be no less than human hearts.

He came at us—gobbling and yelping like an animal in pain.

We, held firmly by our armored guards, could do nothing; he passed by, yanking savagely at my clamps. I was forced to groan, and went down on my knees. The agony in my shoulders was intense.

He yelped and passed me by. I saw him pass from one to another, till he came to Marcus and, pulling mightily, tugged the clamps away.

He held them high and cast them down and all the people shouted.

"The gods want this one first!" he gobbled, and seized by his guards, Marcus went forward at a stumbling run to the stinking altar, where red-robed butchers waited with their obsidian knives.

And there our Marcus was foully done to death by those red-handed sons of hell, slowly to satisfy better those evil gods of darkness!

First they tore the skin from back and shoulders, and watching under bitter compulsion by our guards, we saw Marcus faint and saw him wake again, bravely trying to keep quiet while they mutilated him to the glory of their gods.

We watched—heaven forgive us!—and felt our hearts leave us and lumps of iron take their place, and we heard him at last, with all strength gone from him—heard him cry and moan and scream for mercy or death—and we watched! We watched and could do nothing!

IT WAS after midday when they began. The sun had perceptibly lowered when they ripped out his quivering heart and held it to the sun as an offering. He had but just died, for upon his lips still lingered the smile he gave me, his only kinsman, when he caught my eye and foresaw the near sheltering wing of merciful death, racing fast to fling over him its peaceful shadow.

Myrdhinn was muttering, "Had I but my tools! Almighty Creator, why am I separated from my tools?"

The others cursed or prayed or wept, as the mood swept them.

I alone, dry-eyed, watched the sacrifice of my beautiful nephew, and in my heart I knew that nothing could permit such a foul deed to go unavenged. I swore an oath that I would live; I would escape, I would raise a power in this merciless land that would sweep this civilization, and all it stood for, from the face of the earth.

One might think that we could see no further indignity perpetrated on the dead, but they had not yet finished their cruel rites. With heavy stone choppers, the body was cut into tiny fragments and the lesser priests scattered the bits far and wide among the folk, who partook of these morsels as we might partake of a sacrament.

Next, Myrdhinn was hustled forward and bound to a post of the pavilion, and Nicanor, Tiburcus and Agrestis (would I could write their names in gold!) were unbound, given bows and arrows and commanded by Kukulcan to display their skill with these weapons.

Myrdhinn closed his eyes, his lips moved as though in prayer. I saw the Three confer briefly, tighten strings, fit arrows and raise their bows. Then I looked away.

Strings thrummed, there was a frightful screech and I saw that gross beast, Kukul-

can, staggering with an arrow in his belly, saw him tug and quiver and fall; heard arrows whistle into the group around the altar, beheld the H'menes scatter and run, and drop; saw the chief butcher who had selected Marcus, bounding about, cackling, an arrow in his eye; heard my own voice and that of my comrades raising a good Roman cheer; and watched the Three fall, pierced through and through with fifty lances.

Thus ended the ceremonies of execution.

Myrdhinn was unbound and returned to us, and because dark clouds were gathering, as if the elements were angry at the enormities done upon that wicked altar, the surviving H'menes hurried to relight their sacred fire, before the clouds covered the face of their deity and made this impossible.

So, after all, against Hayonwatha's prediction, we did see the Sastun, a perfect crystal, used in focussing the sun's rays upon tinder, and saw the flame rise beneath the shelter of that pavilion, where attendants watched always, protecting the sacred fire.

We saw, as we were being clubbed ruthlessly back into the pits, a fortune in pearls being cast into the blaze to atone for our sacrilege and remembered with a shock that Myrdhinn had seemed confident that we were not to die this day. Again I wondered, as often before, just how much he could foretell the future, and wondered why sometimes he appeared to know so much, and other times apparently no more than the rest of us.

Later, as we squatted, naked and cold, on the damp floor of our prison, with night come over the lands above us and the sure promise of a mighty sacrifice of us all, beginning with sunrise, Myrdhinn bemoaned again the lack of his tools of magic, saying:

"Bereft of everything, what can I do? Had I but a leaf of oak, of ash and of thorn, I could free us all and with weapons we might make such an account of ourselves that these folk would not forget us!"

"Say you so, indeed?" eagerly cried Kulhwch, brother of that Kinal'ch who had died at sea. "I have on me, in this amulet, at this very moment, not only a leaf each of oak, ash and thorn, but also a leaf of vervain and three berries of oak mistletoe. These barbarians left me my amulet, thinking it worthless! Tell us, Myrdhinn, how can it help us?"

"First," said Myrdhinn, "we must have light."

Almost with the words his face began to shine with a glow-worm's light—a most uncanny sight in that dreadful, oppressing dark.

After, he held his palms upon his cheeks, and as he stroked them, his hands likewise began glowing, while we stared in utter fascination at the head and hands shining bodiless in the black.

"Tell me," said Myrdhinn, inspecting the amulet, picking out the stitches with his thumbnail, "how do you come by this charm? If dishonestly, it will not avail!"

"Honestly, O Seer," proudly proclaimed Kulhwch. "I was told by my father that I had faery blood in my veins and when I was born in the mystical city of Emrys, elfin horns blew for three days everywhere in Tir-nan-Og. 'Twas sent me by my godmother (reputedly a faery) who dwells in the Four-horned Castle at Caer Sidi. Kinal'ch had also one, but it did him little good, nor is like to do me more."

"You are mistaken there," said Myrdhinn, "for this charm, given to you to insure foresight and good judgment, gives me the ingredients we need for escape Yet——" He hesitated. "It means a plunge into Black Magic. I have shunned that for fifty years. There are dangers for the soul."

"There is a sure and certain danger here for the bodies of us all, Myrdhinn!" I cried

impatiently. "By all the gods, if you can get us out of here, do so. We are rats in a trap! Get us out and let us fight for our lives. Remember Marcus!"

"Aye, Marcus. I am not forgetting Marcus. There will be vengeance. But this thing—Varro, you little know what you ask!

"Yet I will do it, for I see no other way. I will do it, let come what may. Our Lord be my judge, it is a good cause. Be silent all, nor speak a single word, whatever you may see."

UNDER his breath, I heard him patter a mumbling prayer; heard mention of Hên Ddihenydd, the "Ancient and Unoriginated One"; heard the name of Keridwen and her hideous son Avaggdu, and then no more, the whisper was so faint.

His head fell backward as though he had fainted; he lay upon the floor, seemingly without life. The shining hands raised as though they belonged to another than Myrdhinn; they lifted the contents of the amulet, a mingled powder of crumbled leaves, and dropped a pinch upon each closed eyelid and the bearded lips.

The light faded from the hands.

I saw a shining mist, the breath of life, leave Myrdhinn's nostrils.

The light faded from the face.

The shining mist thickened and grew smaller than a man's fist. It fell to the floor.

The light faded from the mist.

I heard the sucking and clatter of little, pulpy, clawed feet running over the floor. They reached the grille and went on.

The very sound was gone.

I cannot say how long we waited, though it seemed very long. Footsteps sounded in the corridor and torchlight gleamed in upon us. A guard entered. His eyes were wild and staring. He looked straight before him and spoke no word.

He walked directly to Myrdhinn and swept the crumbled bits of leaf from his face. Myrdhinn sat up.

"It is done," he said to us; then to the guard, "Lead us from this place, and to our arms."

The guard turned, still wildly staring without a motion of eyeball or eyelids, and with no reply he stalked stiffly out the door. We followed.

Halfway down the corridor, we saw a guard standing stiffly, holding a torch, and we shrank into the shadows, but Myrdhinn, laughing grimly, said:

"Come, fainthearts, and follow. No man lives below ground in this heathen temple. Quickly! Quickly!"

So we followed the walking dead man to the chamber near the entrance, where in a storeroom was piled our property and much tin.

I reached for my lorica, donned it, and heard a thud near me. The guard had fallen and his torch filled the chamber with wild light.

"Quickly!" urged Myrdhinn, thrusting it into a wall cresset. "The man is dead, and will be rottenness and corruption in a few moments. His soul has descended to Annwn, the lowest abyss of Cythraul, and his flesh cannot long abide the separation. Soon he and the other sentries here will be bare bones. I cannot repeat this, or my soul is also lost! Haste, lest we be discovered!"

Before him fell naked Hayonwatha, beating his breast, abasing himself, kissing Myrdhinn's hand, and crowding around came the other ten Chichamecs.

"Great Tarenyawagon!" moaned the stately Hayonwatha. "Sender of dreams! Master of Death! Forgive us that we did not know you!"

"Rise, friend. Let us be away."

And he helped the red man to rise, who looked at him with the adoring eyes of a loving dog.

We got into our armor, shouldered our

articles of greatest value, made packs of everything in Myrdhinn's chest, that he in future might lack for nothing, and eyed wistfully the clamps and gears of the tormentæ and arrow-engines, but could not carry them.

So, armed and willing to kill, we came above ground.

At the pavilion, watching the sacred fire near the unhallowed altar, sat three H'mene neophytes.

We wrinkled our noses, for the altar stunk dreadfully. Then, with a horrid shock, it came to us that it was not the altar we smelled! They were dead, bloated, and burst open!

Truly, Myrdhinn had said aright that the body could not abide the separation of the soul!

We passed down the side of the Egg. Houses on each side were blank and dark. No torches flared at the outworks, but we could see a sentinel leaning against the gateway, barring our path.

Myrdhinn led on. We followed, to find that the man was not whole. His bones were dry and rattled when he fell.

And so we left that accursed city.

Now behind us, before we were far, began a shouting, but we were already nearing the wooded land, beyond the tilled fields, and as we reached them, at Myrdhinn's signal, a little flittermouse came flapping, eyed us evilly and went squeaking toward the city.

In the dusk we could see it take a direction that would bring it around the waking City of the Snake, and as we disappeared among the trees, hurrying for our very lives, we heard the wind from nowhere, coming over us in a gentle breeze, the first airy outriders of the fearful cavalry of the storm which would follow to devastate and destroy.

And this time there would be no Myrdhinn to call off those trampling cataphracts of the gathering windy legions.

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You will not want to miss the thrilling chapters of this story in next month's issue of WEIRD TALES. We suggest that you reserve your copy at your magazine dealer's now.

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# The Dead Speak

BY VIVIAN STRATTON

Last night I saw you standing by my bier
In lonely, broken-hearted agony.
I spoke to you, but could not make you hear,
I stood beside you, but you did not see.
I stroked your hair when you were on your knees
In prayer; you felt, but thought it was a breeze.

Despairingly, I whispered in your ear:
You thought it was the beating of your heart.
The time was short for me to linger here,
God's voice had called, and so I must depart.
One candle flared into a tall, black plume
As wearily I sighed and left the room.

# Finished Game

By HARRY BUTMAN

*What weird compulsion led the player to make the moves he did in that archaic chess game?*

MR. CABOT reluctantly pushed a black pawn forward. His position was nearly hopeless, and familiar symptoms of frustration and annoyance began to simmer in him. This was the worst of being club champion. You had to play every touring master who came to Boston.

The thin-faced youngster across the table brought his cleverly masked bishop out of hiding.

"Check," he said.

Mr. Cabot made a pretense of studying the board. You had to look as though you were trying, if only for the sake of the century-old tradition of the Sommers Club. There seemed to be something familiar about the position of the pieces. Suddenly his attention sharpened. The pieces were approaching Morrison's Game.

"The first time I've ever seen it come up in play," he murmured.

"I beg your pardon," said his opponent.

"Excuse me," said Mr. Cabot. "I just remembered something."

On a shelf in a closet of that very room stood an unfinished game, with bone chessmen, stuck to the board with varnish a century had set, arranged as the pieces in today's game, with only the positions of black's king and white's knight altered. There was a tale told of that carefully preserved game.

The first and greatest of the Sommers Club champions was Talbot Morrison, who, during his *Wanderjahr* on the Continent had amazed the chess masters of the Old World with the genius of his play.

When Mr. Cabot was a boy he had heard the story from one who had been present that morning when Talbot Morrison's carelessness had brought him to the verge of checkmate while playing a novice from Salem. Perhaps it was not wholly carelessness, for as Morrison sat drumming the table with his fingers, Henry Crandall, his closest friend, pushed his bulky watch into a pocket of his flowered waistcoat, and touched Morrison on the arm.

"We'll be late, Talbot," he said.

Talbot Morrison stood up reluctantly.

"By the laws of chess," he said, "I forfeit this game by leaving the room. But will you do me the honor, sir, to permit me to finish the game later? Had I more time I think I could study out a solution."

His opponent beamed, well pleased at the play that had placed the great Morrison in an impossible position.

"We'll put the board aside, Mr. Morrison," he agreed, "till you come back."

"Thank you," said Talbot Morrison. "I will certainly return to finish this game."

But when Talbot Morrison came back from his trip from a lonely West Roxbury farm he played no chess, for there was an ounce ball in his brain. His adversary fled to Canada, for affairs of honor were no longer legal.

Out of memory to their champion the directors caused the pieces to be varnished

in place and set aside. Through the years, now and then, men toyed with the problem, and while some could stave off black's defeat longer than could others, it was at last conceded by all that white was unbeatable. Mr. Cabot had tried it himself alone in the club, afternoons, but the odd unease that assailed him, the curious sense of pressure on him whenever the game was set up, led him to cease seeking a solution.

MR. CABOT, back in the present, moved his king out of check. He was certain his opponent would move the white knight. A dream-quality, a sense of having been there before, was creeping over Mr. Cabot. The young man moved his knight.

There it was. After a hundred years, out of all the infinite combinations possible to chess, Morrison's Game had at last reappeared.

Mr. Cabot definitely did not like the way his mind was behaving. You're getting as silly as Old Bangs, he told himself.

Old Bangs was the club custodian, a fey old fellow who put outlandish interpretations on the noises he heard about the venerable chambers at night, surmises which so annoyed Mr. Cabot that only yesterday he had baited a trap with his own hands and a bit of his own Stilton to prove to Old Bangs that nothing more eery than a solitary rat was responsible. Mr. Cabot wouldn't have liked it if anyone had said that he had sacrificed genuine imported Stilton because he too wanted proof.

Mr. Cabot watched his right hand irrelevantly move a pawn. He wasn't sure why he made that particular move. His opponent puckered his lips, breathed through his teeth in an abstracted fashion, and countered. Again Mr. Cabot's hand made an apparently aimless move. This time the young man looked keenly at him and studied the board for several minutes before responding.

The habitues of the club watching the game, began to buzz softly behind the backs of their hands. Swiftly, as though he had rehearsed this game many times, Mr. Cabot maneuvered his pieces. The young man buried his head in his hands and thought long over each reply. But, incredibly, black had seized the offensive and the white pieces were in retreat.

Somewhat over an hour later Mr. Cabot made his final move.

"Checkmate," he said.

Mr. Cabot was aware of his friends jovially pummeling his shoulders. He was also aware of the amazement on his opponent's face.

"Why," he cried, looking at Mr. Cabot wildly, "you played like nothing human. How did you do it?"

"I don't know," began Mr. Cabot confusedly, rubbing his hand hard across his eyes. "I——"

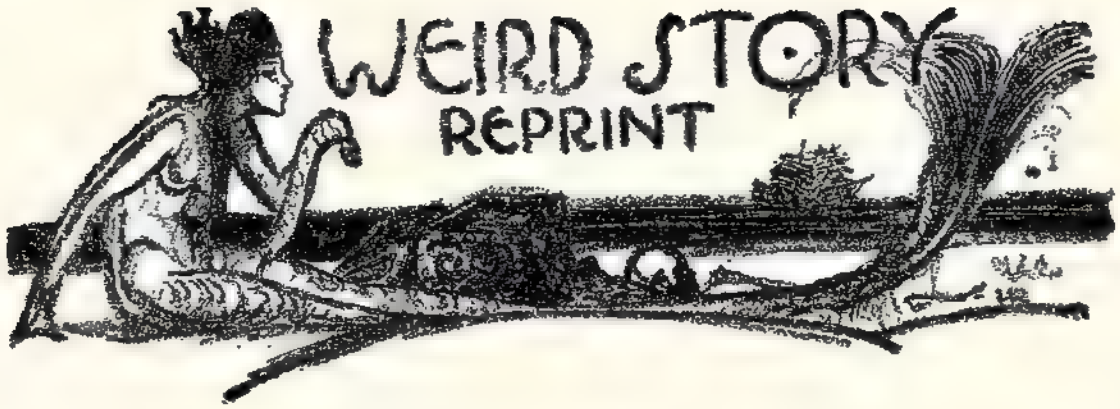
A muffled crash from the closet stopped him.

Old Bangs was the first to open the door. The board with Morrison's Game had fallen from the shelf, and the pieces were scattered.

"You were right, Mr. Cabot," admitted Old Bangs. "It was a rat, after all. And he's finished that game, all right."

Mr. Cabot's mind was still confused from his strange victory.

Should I tell him, he wondered, that I caught the rat this morning?




# Worms of the Earth

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

"STRIKE in the nails, soldiers, and let our guest see the reality of our good Roman justice!"

The speaker wrapped his purple cloak closer about his powerful frame and settled back into his official chair, much as he might have settled back in his seat at the Circus Maximus to enjoy the clash of gladiatorial swords. Realization of power colored his every move. Whetted pride was necessary to Roman satisfaction, and Titus Sulla was justly proud; for he was military governor of Ebbracum and answerable only to the Emperor of Rome. He was a strongly built man of medium height, with the hawk-like features of the pure-bred Roman. Now a mocking smile curved his full lips, increasing the arrogance of his haughty aspect. Distinctly military in appearance, he wore the golden-scaled corselet and chased breastplate of his rank, with the short stabbing-sword at his belt, and he held on his knee the silvered helmet with its plumed crest. Behind him stood a clump of impassive soldiers with shield and spear—blond titans from the Rhineland.

Before him was taking place the scene which apparently gave him so much real gratification—a scene common enough wherever stretched the far-flung boundaries of Rome. A rude cross lay flat upon the barren earth and on it was bound a man—half naked, wild of aspect with his corded limbs, glaring eyes and shock of tangled hair. His executioners were Roman soldiers, and with heavy hammers they prepared to pin the victim's hands and feet to the wood with iron spikes.

Only a small group of men watched this ghastly scene, in the dread place of execution beyond the city walls: the governor and his watchful guards; a few young Roman officers; the man to whom Sulla had referred as "guest" and who stood like a bronze image, unspeaking. Beside the gleaming splendor of the Roman, the quiet garb of this man seemed drab, almost somber.

He was dark, but he did not resemble the Latins around him. There was about him none of the warm, almost Oriental sensuality of the Mediterranean which colored their features. The blond barbarians

* From WEIRD TALES for November, 1932.

behind Sulla's chair were less unlike the man in facial outline than were the Romans. Not his were the full curving lips, nor the rich waving locks suggestive of the Greek. Nor was his dark complexion the rich olive of the south; rather it was the bleak darkness of the north. The whole aspect of the man vaguely suggested the shadowed mists, the gloom, the cold and icy winds of the naked northern lands. Even his black eyes were savagely cold, like black fires burning through fathoms of ice.

His height was only medium but there was something about him which transcended mere physical bulk — a certain fierce innate vitality, comparable only to that of a wolf or a panther. In every line of his supple, compact body, as well as in his coarse straight hair and thin lips, this was evident—in the hawk-like set of the head on the corded neck, in the broad square shoulders, in the deep chest, the lean loins, the narrow feet. Built with the savage economy of a panther, he was an image of dynamic potentialities, pent in with iron self-control.

At his feet crouched one like him in complexion—but there the resemblance ended. This other was a stunted giant, with gnarly limbs, thick body, a low sloping brow and an expression of dull ferocity, now clearly mixed with fear. If the man on the cross resembled, in a tribal way, the man Titus Sulla called guest, he far more resembled the stunted crouching giant.

"Well, Partha Mac Othna," said the governor with studied effrontery, "when you return to your tribe, you will have a tale to tell of the justice of Rome, who rules the south."

"I will have a tale," answered the other in a voice which betrayed no emotion, just as his dark face, schooled to immobility, showed no evidence of the maelstrom in his soul.

"Justice to all under the rule of Rome," said Sulla. "*Pax Romana!* Reward for virtue, punishment for wrong!" He laughed inwardly at his own black hypocrisy, then continued: "You see, emissary of Pictland, how swiftly Rome punishes the transgressor."

"I see," answered the Pict in a voice which strongly-curbed anger made deep with menace, "that the subject of a foreign king is dealt with as though he were a Roman slave."

"He has been tried and condemned in an unbiased court," retorted Sulla.

"Aye! and the accuser was a Roman, the witnesses Roman, the judge Roman! He committed murder? In a moment of fury he struck down a Roman merchant who cheated, tricked and robbed him, and to injury added insult—aye, and a blow! Is his king but a dog, that Rome crucifies his subjects at will, condemned by Roman courts? Is his king too weak or foolish to do justice, were he informed and formal charges brought against the offender?"

"Well," said Sulla cynically, "you may inform Bran Mak Morn yourself. Rome, my friend, makes no account of her actions to barbarian kings. When savages come among us, let them act with discretion or suffer the consequences."

THE Pict shut his iron jaws with a snap that told Sulla further badgering would elicit no reply. The Roman made a gesture to the executioners. One of them seized a spike and placing it against the thick wrist of the victim smote heavily. The iron point sank deep through the flesh, crunching against the bones. The lips of the man on the cross writhed, though no moan escaped him. As a trapped wolf fights against his cage, the bound victim instinctively wrenched and struggled. The veins swelled in his temples, sweat beaded his low forehead, the muscles in arms and legs writhed and knotted. The hammers fell in inexorable strokes, driving the cruel

points deeper and deeper, through wrists and ankles; blood flowed in a black river over the hands that held the spikes, staining the wood of the cross, and the splintering of bones was distinctly heard. Yet the sufferer made no outcry, though his blackened lips writhed back until the gums were visible, and his shaggy head jerked involuntarily from side to side.

The man called Partha Mac Othna stood like an iron image, eyes burning from an inscrutable face, his whole body as hard as iron from the tension of his control. At his feet crouched his misshapen servant, hiding his face from the grim sight, his arms locked about his master's knees. Those arms gripped like steel and under his breath the fellow mumbled ceaselessly as if in invocation.

The last stroke fell; the cords were cut from arm and leg, so that the man would hang supported by the nails alone. He had ceased his struggling that only twisted the spikes in his agonizing wounds. His bright black eyes, unglazed, had not left the face of the man called Partha Mac Othna; in them lingered a desperate shadow of hope. Now the soldiers lifted the cross and set the end of it in the hole prepared, stamped the dirt about it to hold it erect.

The Pict hung in mid-air, suspended by the nails in his flesh, but still no sound escaped his lips. His eyes still hung on the somber face of the emissary, but the shadow of hope was fading.

"He'll live for days!" said Sulla cheerfully. "These Picts are harder than cats to kill! I'll keep a guard of ten soldiers watching day and night to see that no one takes him down before he dies. Ho, there, Valerius, in honor of our esteemed neighbor, King Bran Mak Morn, give him a cup of wine!"

With a laugh the young officer came forward, holding a brimming wine-cup, and rising on his toes, lifted it to the parched lips of the sufferer. In the black eyes flared a red wave of unquenchable hatred; writhing his head aside to avoid even touching the cup, he spat full into the young Roman's eyes. With a curse Valerius dashed the cup to the ground, and before any could halt him, wrenched out his sword and sheathed it in the man's body.

Sulla rose with an imperious exclamation of anger; the man called Partha Mac Othna had started violently, but he bit his lip and said nothing. Valerius seemed somewhat surprised at him, as he sullenly cleansed his sword. The act had been instinctive, following the insult to Roman pride, the one thing unbearable.

"Give up your sword, young sir!" exclaimed Sulla. "Centurion Publius, place him under arrest. A few days in a cell with stale bread and water will teach you to curb your patrician pride, in matters dealing with the will of the empire. What, you young fool, do you not realize that you could not have made the dog a more kindly gift? Who would not rather desire a quick death on the sword than the slow agony on the cross? Take him away. And you, centurion, see that guards remain at the cross so that the body is not cut down until the ravens pick bare the bones. Partha Mac Othna, I go to a banquet at the house of Demetrius—will you not accompany me?"

The emissary shook his head, his eyes fixed on the limp form which sagged on the black-stained cross. He made no reply. Sulla smiled sardonically, then rose and strode away, followed by his secretary who bore the gilded chair ceremoniously, and by the stolid soldiers, with whom walked Valerius, head sunken.

The man called Partha Mac Othna flung a wide fold of his cloak about his shoulder, halted a moment to gaze at the grim cross with its burden, darkly etched against the crimson sky, where the clouds of night

were gathering. Then he stalked away, followed by his silent servant.

2

IN AN inner chamber of Ebbracum, the man called Partha Mac Othna paced tigerishly to and fro. His sandaled feet made no sound on the marble tiles.

"Grom!" he turned to the gnarled servant, "well I know why you held my knees so tightly—why you muttered aid of the Moon-Woman—you feared I would lose my self-control and make a mad attempt to succor the poor wretch. By the gods, I believe that was what the dog Roman wished—his iron-cased watch-dogs watched me narrowly, I know, and his baiting was harder to bear than ordinarily.

"God black and white, dark and light!" he shook his clenched fists above his head in the black gust of his passion. "That I should stand by and see a man of mine butchered on a Roman cross—without justice and with no more trial than that farce! Black gods of R'lyeh, even you would I invoke to the ruin and destruction of those butchers! I swear by the Nameless Ones, men shall die howling for that deed, and Rome shall cry out as a woman in the dark who treads upon an adder!"

"He knew you, master," said Grom.

The other dropped his head and covered his eyes with a gesture of savage pain.

"His eyes will haunt me when I lie dying. Aye, he knew me, and almost until the last, I read in his eyes the hope that I might aid him. Gods and devils, is Rome to butcher my people beneath my very eyes? Then I am not king but dog!"

"Not so loud, in the name of all the gods!" exclaimed Grom in affright. "Did these Romans suspect you were Bran Mak Morn, they would nail you on a cross beside that other."

"They will know it ere long," grimly answered the king. "Too long I have lingered here in the guise of an emissary, spying upon mine enemies. They have thought to play with me, these Romans, masking their contempt and scorn only under polished satire. Rome is courteous to barbarian ambassadors, they give us fine houses to live in, offer us slaves, pander to our lusts with women and gold and wine and games, but all the while they laugh at us; their very courtesy is an insult, and sometimes—as today—their contempt discards all veneer. Bah! I've seen through their baitings—have remained imperturbably serene and swallowed their studied insults. But this—by the fiends of Hell, this is beyond human endurance! My people look to me; if I fail them—if I fail even one — even the lowest of my people, who will aid them? To whom shall they turn? By the gods, I'll answer the gibes of these Roman dogs with black shaft and trenchant steel!"

"And the chief with the plumes?" Grom meant the governor, and his gutterals thrummed with the blood-lust. "He dies?" He flicked out a length of steel.

Bran scowled. "Easier said than done. He dies—but how may I reach him? By day his German guards keep at his back; by night they stand at door and window. He has many enemies, Romans as well as barbarians. Many a Briton would gladly slit his throat."

Grom seized Bran's garment, stammering as fierce eagerness broke the bonds of his inarticulate nature.

"Let me go, master! My life is worth nothing. I will cut him down in the midst of his warriors!"

Bran smiled fiercely and clapped his hand on the stunted giant's shoulder with a force that would have felled a lesser man.

"Nay, old war-dog, I have too much need of thee! You shall not throw your life away uselessly. Sulla would read the intent in your eyes, besides, and the javelins of his Teutons would be through you

ere you could reach him. Not by the dagger in the dark will we strike this Roman, not by the venom in the cup nor the shaft from the ambush."

The king turned and paced the floor a moment, his head bent in thought. Slowly his eyes grew murky with a thought so fearful he did not speak it aloud to the waiting warrior.

"I have become somewhat familiar with the maze of Roman politics during my stay in this accursed waste of mud and marble," said he. "During a war on the Wall, Titus Sulla, as governor of this province, is supposed to hasten thither with his centuries. But this Sulla does not do; he is no coward, but the bravest avoid certain things —to each man, however bold, his own particular fear. So he sends in his place Caius Camillus, who in times of peace patrols the fens of the west, lest the Britons break over the border. And Sulla takes his place in the Tower of Trajan. Ha!"

He whirled and gripped Grom with steely fingers.

"Grom, take the red stallion and ride north! Let no grass grow under the stallion's hoofs! Ride to Cormac na Connacht and tell him to sweep the frontier with sword and torch! Let his wild Gaels feast their fill of slaughter. After a time I will be with him. But for a time I have affairs in the west."

Grom's black eyes gleamed and he made a passionate gesture with his crooked hand —an instinctive move of savagery.

Bran drew a heavy bronze seal from beneath his tunic.

"This is my safe-conduct as an emissary to Roman courts," he said grimly. "It will open all gates between this house and Baal-dor. If any official questions you too closely—here!"

Lifting the lid of an iron-bound chest, Bran took out a small, heavy leather bag which he gave into the hands of the warrior.

"When all keys fail at a gate," said he, "try a golden key. Go now!"

There was no ceremonious farewell between the barbarian king and his barbarian vassal. Grom flung up his arm in a gesture of salute; then turning, he hurried out.

Bran stepped to a barred window and gazed out into the moonlit streets.

"Wait until the moon sets," he muttered grimly. "Then I'll take the road to—Hell! But before I go I have a debt to pay."

The stealthy clink of a hoof on the flags reached him.

"With the safe-conduct and gold, not even Rome can hold a Pictish reaver," muttered the king. "Now I'll sleep until the moon sets."

WITH a snarl at the marble friezework and fluted columns, as symbols of Rome, he flung himself down on a couch, from which he had long since impatiently torn the cushions and silk stuffs, as too soft for his hard body. Hate and the black passion for vengeance seethed in him, yet he went instantly to sleep. The first lesson he had learned in his bitter hard life was to snatch sleep any time he could, like a wolf that snatches sleep on the hunting trail. Generally his slumber was as light and dreamless as a panther's, but tonight it was otherwise.

He sank into fleecy gray fathoms of slumber and in a timeless, misty realm of shadows he met the tall, lean, white-bearded figure of old Gonar, the priest of the Moon, high counsellor to the king. And Bran stood aghast, for Gonar's face was white as driven snow and he shook with ague. Well might Bran stand appalled, for in all the years of his life he had never before seen Gonar the Wise show any sign of fear.

"What now, old one?" asked the king. "Goes all well in Baal-dor?"

"All is well in Baal-dor where my body

lies sleeping," answered old Gonar. "Across the void I have come to battle with you for your soul. King, are you mad, this thought you have in your brain?"

"Gonar," answered Bran somberly, "this day I stood still and watched a man of mine die on the cross of Rome. What his name or his rank, I do not know. I do not care. He might have been a faithful unknown warrior of mine, he might have been an outlaw. I only know that he was mine; the first scents he knew were the scents of the heather; the first light he saw was the sunrise on the Pictish hills. He belonged to me, not to Rome. If punishment was just, then none but me should have dealt it. If it were to be tried, none but me should have been his judge. The same blood flowed in our veins; the same fire maddened our brains; in infancy we listened to the same old tales, and in youth we sang the same old songs. He was bound to my heartstrings, as every man and every woman and every child of Pictland is bound. It was mine to protect him! now it is mine to avenge him."

"But in the name of the gods, Bran," expostulated the wizard, "take your vengeance in another way! Return to the heather —mass your warriors—join with Cormac and his Gaels, and spread a sea of blood and flame the length of the great Wall!"

"All that I will do," grimly answered Bran. "But now—*now*—I will have a vengeance such as no Roman ever dreamed of! Ha, what do they know of the mysteries of this ancient isle, which sheltered strange life long before Rome rose from the marshes of the Tiber?"

"Bran, there are weapons too foul to use, even against Rome!"

Bran barked short and sharp as a jackal.

"Ha! There are no weapons I would not use against Rome! My back is at the wall. By the blood of the fiends, has Rome fought me fair? Bah! I am a barbarian king with a wolfskin mantle and an iron crown, fighting with my handful of bows and broken pikes against the queen of the world. What have I? The heather hills, the wattle huts, the spears of my shock-headed tribesmen! And I fight Rome—with her armored legions, her broad fertile plains and rich seas—her mountains and her rivers and her gleaming cities—her wealth, her steel, her gold, her mastery and her wrath. By steel and fire I will fight her—and by subtlety and treachery—by the thorn in the foot, the adder in the path, the venom in the cup, the dagger in the dark; aye," his voice sank somberly, "and by the worms of the earth!"

"But it is madness!" cried Gonar. "You will perish in the attempt you plan—you will go down to Hell and you will not return! What of your people then?"

"If I cannot serve them I had better die," growled the king.

"But you cannot reach the beings you seek," cried Gonar. "For untold centuries they have dwelt apart. There is no door by which you can come to them. Long ago they severed the bonds that bound them to the world we know."

"Long ago," answered Bran somberly, "you told me that nothing in the universe was separated from the stream of Life—a saying the truth of which I have often seen evident. No race, no form of life but is close-knit somehow, by some manner, to the rest of Life and the world. Somewhere there is a thin link connecting *those* I seek to the world I know. Somewhere there is a Door. And somewhere among the bleak fens of the west I will find it."

Stark horror flooded Gonar's eyes and he gave back crying, "Wo! Wo! Wo! to Pictdom! Wo to the unborn kingdom! Wo, black wo to the sons of men!"

BRAN awoke to a shadowed room and the starlight on the window-bars. The moon had sunk from sight, though its

glow was still faint above the house tops. Memory of his dream shook him and he swore beneath his breath.

Rising, he flung off cloak and mantle, donning a light shirt of black mesh-mail, and girding a sword and dirk. Going again to the iron-bound chest he lifted several compact bags and emptied the clinking contents into the leathern pouch at his girdle. Then wrapping his wide cloak about him, he silently left the house. No servants there were to spy on him—he had impatiently refused the offer of slaves which it was Rome's policy to furnish her barbarian emissaries. Gnarled Grom had attended to all Bran's simple needs.

The stables fronted on the courtyard. A moment's groping in the dark and he placed his hand over the great stallion's nose, checking the nicker of recognition. Working without a light he swiftly bridled and saddled the great brute, and went through the courtyard into a shadowy side-street, leading him. The moon was setting, the border of floating shadows widening along the western wall. Silence lay on the marble palaces and mud hovels of Ebbracum under the cold stars.

Bran touched the pouch at his girdle, which was heavy with minted gold that bore the stamp of Rome. He had come to Ebbracum posing as an emissary of Pictdom, to act the spy. But being a barbarian, he had not been able to play his part in aloof formality and sedate dignity. He retained a crowded memory of wild feasts where wine flowed in fountains; of white-bosomed Roman women, who, sated with civilized lovers, looked with something more than favor on a virile barbarian; of gladiatorial games; and of other games where dice clicked and spun and tall stacks of gold changed hands. He had drunk deeply and gambled recklessly, after the manner of barbarians, and he had had a remarkable run of luck, due possibly to the indifference with which he won or lost. Gold to the Pict was so much dust, flowing through his fingers. In his land there was no need of it. But he had learned its power in the boundaries of civilization.

Almost under the shadow of the northwestern wall he saw ahead of him loom the great watch-tower which was connected with and reared above the outer wall. One corner of the castle-like fortress, farthest from the wall, served as a dungeon. Bran left his horse standing in a dark alley, with the reins hanging on the ground, and stole like a prowling wolf into the shadows of the fortress.

The young officer Valerius was awakened from a light, unquiet sleep by a stealthy sound at the barred window. He sat up, cursing softly under his breath as the faint starlight which etched the window-bars fell across the bare stone floor and reminded him of his disgrace. Well, in a few days, he ruminated, he'd be well out of it; Sulla would not be too harsh on a man with such high connections; then let any man or woman gibe at him! Damn that insolent Pict! But wait, he thought suddenly, remembering: what of the sound which had roused him?

"Hssst!" it was a voice from the window.

Why so much secrecy? It could hardly be a foe—yet, why should it be a friend? Valerius rose and crossed his cell, coming close to the window. Outside all was dim in the starlight and he made out but a shadowy form close to the window.

"Who are you?" he leaned close against the bars, straining his eyes into the gloom.

His answer was a snarl of wolfish laughter, a long flicker of steel in the starlight. Valerius reeled away from the window and crashed to the floor, clutching his throat, gurgling horribly as he tried to scream. Blood gushed through his fingers, forming about his twitching body a pool that reflected the dim starlight dully and redly.

Outside Bran glided away like a shadow,

without pausing to peer into the cell. In another minute the guards would round the corner on their regular routine. Even now he heard the measured tramp of their iron-clad feet. Before they came in sight he had vanished and they clumped stolidly by the cell-windows with no intimation of the corpse that lay on the floor within.

Bran rode to the small gate in the western wall, unchallenged by the sleepy watch. What fear of foreign invasion in Ebbracum?—and certain well-organized thieves and women-stealers made it profitable for the watchmen not to be too vigilant. But the single guardsman at the western gate —his fellows lay drunk in a near-by brothel —lifted his spear and bawled for Bran to halt and give an account of himself. Silently the Pict reined closer. Masked in the dark cloak, he seemed dim and indistinct to the Roman, who was only aware of the glitter of his cold eyes in the gloom. But Bran held up his hand against the starlight and the soldier caught the gleam of gold; in the other hand he saw a long sheen of steel. The soldier understood, and he did not hesitate between the choice of a golden bribe or a battle to the death with this unknown rider who was apparently a barbarian of some sort. With a grunt he lowered his spear and swung the gate open. Bran rode through, casting a handful of coins to the Roman. They fell about his feet in a golden shower, clinking against the flags. He bent in greedy haste to retrieve them and Bran Mak Morn rode westward like a flying ghost in the night.

3

INTO the dim fens of the west came Bran Mak Morn. A cold wind breathed across the gloomy waste and against the gray sky a few herons flapped heavily. The long reeds and marsh-grass waved in broken undulations and out across the desolation of the wastes a few still meres reflected the dull light. Here and there rose curiously regular hillocks above the general levels, and gaunt against the somber sky Bran saw a marching line of upright monoliths — menhirs, reared by what nameless hands?

A faint blue line to the west lay the foothills that beyond the horizon grew to the wild mountains of Wales where dwelt still wild Celtic tribes—fierce blue-eyed men that knew not the yoke of Rome. A row of well-garrisoned watch-towers held them in check. Even now, far away across the moors, Bran glimpsed the unassailable keep men called the Tower of Trajan.

These barren wastes seemed the dreary accomplishment of desolation, yet human life was not utterly lacking. Bran met the silent men of the fen, reticent, dark of eye and hair, speaking a strange mixed tongue whose long-blended elements had forgotten their pristine separate sources. Bran recognized a certain kinship in these people to himself, but he looked on them with the scorn of a pure-blooded patrician for men of mixed strains.

Not that the common people of Caledonia were altogether pure-blooded; they got their stocky bodies and massive limbs from a primitive Teutonic race which had found its way into the northern tip of the isle even before the Celtic conquest of Britain was completed, and had been absorbed by the Picts. But the chiefs of Bran's folk had kept their blood from foreign taint since the beginnings of time, and he himself was a pure-bred Pict of the Old Race. But these fenmen, overrun repeatedly by British, Gaelic and Roman conquerors, had assimilated blood of each, and in the process almost forgotten their original language and lineage.

For Bran came of a race that was very old, which had spread over western Europe in one vast Dark Empire, before the coming of the Aryans, when the ancestors of the Celts, the Hellenes and the Germans

were one primal people, before the days of tribal splitting-off and westward drift.

Only in Caledonia, Bran brooded, had his people resisted the flood of Aryan conquest. He had heard of a Pictish people called Basques, who in the crags of the Pyrenees called themselves an unconquered race; but he knew that they had paid tribute for centuries to the ancestors of the Gaels, before these Celtic conquerors abandoned their mountain-realm and set sail for Ireland. Only the Picts of Caledonia had remained free, and they had been scattered into small feuding tribes—he was the first acknowledged king in five hundred years—the beginning of a new dynasty—no, a revival of an ancient dynasty under a new name. In the very teeth of Rome he dreamed his dreams of empire.

He wandered through the fens, seeking a Door. Of his quest he said nothing to the dark-eyed fenmen. They told him news that drifted from mouth to mouth—a tale of war in the north, the skirl of war-pipes along the winding Wall, of gathering-fires in the heather, of flame and smoke and rapine and the glutting of Gaelic swords in the crimson sea of slaughter. The eagles of the legions were moving northward and the ancient road resounded to the measured tramp of the iron-clad feet. And Bran, in the fens of the west, laughed, well pleased.

In Ebbracum, Titus Sulla gave secret word to seek out the Pictish emissary with the Gaelic name who had been under suspicion, and who had vanished the night young Valerius was found dead in his cell with his throat ripped out. Sulla felt that this sudden bursting flame of war on the Wall was connected closely with his execution of a condemned Pictish criminal, and he set his spy system to work, though he felt sure that Partha Mac Othna was by this time far beyond his reach. He prepared to march from Ebbracum but he did not accompany the considerable force of legionaries which he sent north. Sulla was a brave man, but each man has his own dread, and Sulla's was Cormac na Connacht, the black-haired prince of the Gaels, who had sworn to cut out the governor's heart and eat it raw. So Sulla rode with his ever-present bodyguard, westward, where lay the Tower of Trajan with its war-like commander, Caius Camillus, who enjoyed nothing more than taking his superior's place when the red waves of war washed at the foot of the Wall. Devious politics, but the legate of Rome seldom visited this far isle, and what with his wealth and intrigues, Titus Sulla was the highest power in Britain.

And Bran, knowing all this, patiently waited his coming, in the deserted hut in which he had taken up his abode.

One gray evening he strode on foot across the moors, a stark figure, blackly etched against the dim crimson fire of the sunset. He felt the incredible antiquity of the slumbering land, as he walked like the last man on the day after the end of the world! Yet at last he saw a token of human life—a drab hut of wattle and mud, set in the reedy breast of the fen.

A WOMAN greeted him from the open door and Bran's somber eyes narrowed with a dark suspicion. The woman was not old, yet the evil wisdom of ages was in her eyes; her garments were ragged and scanty, her black locks tangled and unkempt, lending her an aspect of wildness well in keeping with her grim surroundings. Her red lips laughed but there was no mirth in her laughter, only a hint of mockery, and under the lips her teeth showed sharp and pointed like fangs.

"Enter, master," said she, "if you do not fear to share the roof of the witch-woman of Dagon-moor!"

Bran entered silently and sat him down on a broken bench while the woman busied herself with the scanty meal cooking over

an open fire on the squalid hearth. He studied her lithe, almost serpentine motions, the ears which were almost pointed, the yellow eyes which slanted curiously.

"What do you seek in the fens, my lord?" she asked, turning toward him with a supple twist of her whole body.

"I seek a Door," he answered, chin resting on his fist. "I have a song to sing to the worms of the earth!"

She started upright, a jar falling from her hands to shatter on the hearth.

"This is an ill saying, even spoken in chance," she stammered.

"I speak not by chance but by intent," he answered.

She shook her head. "I know not what you mean."

"Well you know," he returned. "Aye, you know well! My race is very old—they reigned in Britain before the nations of the Celts and the Hellenes were born out of the womb of peoples. But my people were not first in Britain. By the mottles on your skin, by the slanting of your eyes, by the taint in your veins, I speak with full knowledge and meaning."

Awhile she stood silent, her lips smiling but her face inscrutable.

"Man, are you mad?" she asked, "that in your madness you come seeking that from which strong men fled screaming in old times?"

"I seek a vengeance," he answered, "that can be accomplished only by Them I seek."

She shook her head.

"You have listened to a bird singing; you have dreamed empty dreams."

"I have heard a viper hiss," he growled, "and I do not dream. Enough of this weaving of words. I came seeking a link between two worlds; I have found it."

"I need lie to you no more, man of the North," answered the woman. "They you seek still dwell beneath the sleeping hills. They have drawn *apart*, farther and farther from the world you know."

"But they still steal forth in the night to grip women straying on the moors," said he, his gaze on her slanted eyes. She laughed wickedly.

"What would you of me?"

"That you bring me to Them."

She flung back her head with a scornful laugh. His left hand locked like iron in the breast of her scanty garment and his right closed on his hilt. She laughed in his face.

"Strike and be damned, my northern wolf! Do you think that such life as mine is so sweet that I would cling to it as a babe to the breast?"

His hand fell away.

"You are right. Threats are foolish. I will buy your aid."

"How?" the laughing voice hummed with mockery.

Bran opened his pouch and poured into his cupped palm a stream of gold.

"More wealth than the men of the fen ever dreamed of."

Again she laughed. "What is this rusty metal to me? Save it for some white-breasted Roman woman who will play the traitor for you!"

"Name me a price!" he urged. "The head of an enemy——"

"By the blood in my veins, with its heritage of ancient hate, who is mine enemy but thee?" she laughed, and springing, struck cat-like. But her dagger splintered on the mail beneath his cloak, and he flung her off with a loathsome flirt of his wrist which tossed her sprawling across her grass-strewn bunk. Lying there, she laughed up at him.

"I will name you a price, my wolf, and it may be in days to come you will curse the armor that broke Atla's dagger!" She rose and came close to him, her disquietingly long hands fastened fiercely into his cloak. "I will tell you, Black Bran, king of Caledon! Oh, I knew you when you came into my hut with your black hair

and your cold eyes! I will lead you to the doors of Hell if you wish—and the price shall be the kisses of a king!

"What of my blasted and bitter life, I, whom mortal men loathe and fear? I have not known the love of men, the clasp of a strong arm, the sting of human kisses, I, Atla, the were-woman of the moors! What have I known but the lone winds of the fens, the dreary fire of cold sunsets, the whispering of the marsh grasses?—the faces that blink up at me in the waters of the meres, the foot-pad of night—things in the gloom, the glimmer of red eyes, the grisly murmur of nameless beings in the night!

"I am half human, at least! Have I not known sorrow and yearning and crying wistfulness, and the drear ache of loneliness? Give to me, king—give me your fierce kisses and your hurtful barbarian's embrace. Then in the long drear years to come I shall not utterly eat out my heart in vain envy of the white-bosomed women of men; for I shall have a memory few of them can boast—the kisses of a king! One night of love, O king, and I will guide you to the gates of Hell!"

Bran eyed her somberly; he reached forth and gripped her arm in his iron fingers. An involuntary shudder shook him at the feel of her sleek skin. He nodded slowly and, drawing her close to him, forced his head down to meet her lifted lips.

4

THE cold gray mists of dawn wrapped King Bran like a clammy cloak. He turned to the woman whose slanted eyes gleamed in the gray gloom.

"Make good your part of the contract," he said roughly. "I sought a link between worlds, and in you I found it. I seek the one thing sacred to Them. It shall be the Key opening the Door that lies unseen between me and Them. Tell me how I can reach it."

"I will," the red lips smiled terribly. "Go to the mound men call Dagon's Barrow. Draw aside the stone that blocks the entrance and go under the dome of the mound. The floor of the chamber is made of seven great stones, six grouped about the seventh. Lift out the center stone—and you will see!"

"Will I find the Black Stone?" he asked.

"Dagon's Barrow is the Door to the Black Stone," she answered, "if you dare follow the Road."

"Will the symbol be well guarded?" He unconsciously loosened his blade in its sheath. The red lips curled mockingly.

"If you meet any on the Road, you will die as no mortal man has died for long centuries. The Stone is not guarded, as men guard their treasures. Why should They guard what man has never sought? Perhaps They will be near, perhaps not. It is a chance you must take, if you wish the Stone. Beware, king of Pictdom! Remember it was your folk who, so long ago, cut the thread that bound Them to human life. They were almost human then—they overspread the land and knew the sunlight. Now they have drawn *apart*. They know not the sunlight and they shun the light of the moon. Even the starlight they hate. Far, far apart have they drawn, who might have been men in time, but for the spears of your ancestors."

The sky was overcast with misty gray, through which the sun shone coldly yellow when Bran came to Dagon's Barrow, a round hillock overgrown with rank grass of a curious fungoid appearance. On the eastern side of the mound showed the entrance of a crudely built stone tunnel which evidently penetrated the barrow. One great stone blocked the entrance to the tomb. Bran laid hold of the sharp edges and exerted all his strength. It held fast. He drew his sword and worked the blade

between the blocking stone and the sill. Using the sword as a lever, he worked carefully, and managed to loosen the great stone and wrench it out. A foul charnel-house scent flowed out of the aperture, and the dim sunlight seemed less to illuminate the cavern-like opening than to be fouled by the rank darkness which clung there.

Sword in hand, ready for he knew not what, Bran groped his way into the tunnel, which was long and narrow, built up of heavy joined stones, and was too low for him to stand erect. Either his eyes became somewhat accustomed to the gloom, or the darkness was, after all, somewhat lightened by the sunlight filtering in through the entrance. At any rate, he came into a round, low chamber and was able to make out its general dome-like outline. Here, no doubt, in old times, had reposed the bones of him for whom the stones of the tomb had been joined and the earth heaped high above them; but now of those bones no vestige remained on the stone floor. And bending close and straining his eyes, Bran made out the strange, startlingly regular pattern of that floor: six well-cut slabs clustered about a seventh, six-sided stone.

He drove his sword-point into a crack and pried carefully. The edge of the central stone tilted slightly upward. A little work and he lifted it out and leaned it against the curving wall. Straining his eyes downward he saw only the gaping blackness of a dark well, with small, worn steps that led downward and out of sight. He did not hesitate. Though the skin between his shoulders crawled curiously, he swung himself into the abyss and felt the clinging blackness swallow him.

Groping downward, he felt his feet slip and stumble on steps too small for human feet. With one hand pressed hard against the side of the well he steadied himself, fearing a fall into unknown and unlighted depths. The steps were cut into solid rock, yet they were greatly worn away. The farther he progressed, the less like steps they became, mere bumps of worn stone. Then the direction of the shaft changed sharply. It still led down, but at a shallow slant down which he could walk, elbows braced against the hollowed sides, head bent low beneath the curved roof. The steps had ceased altogether and the stone felt slimy to the touch, like a serpent's lair. What beings, Bran wondered, had slithered up and down this slanting shaft, for how many centuries?

The tunnel narrowed until Bran found it rather difficult to shove through. He lay on his back and pushed himself along with his hands, feet first. Still he knew he was sinking deeper and deeper into the very guts of the earth; how far below the surface he was, he dared not contemplate. Then ahead a faint witch-fire gleam tinged the abysmal blackness. He grinned savagely and without mirth. If They he sought came suddenly upon him, how could he fight in that narrow shaft? But he had put the thought of personal fear behind him when he began this hellish quest. He crawled on, thoughtless of all else but his goal.

And he came at last into a vast space where he could stand upright. He could not see the roof of the place, but he got an impression of dizzying vastness. The blackness pressed in on all sides, and behind him he could see the entrance to the shaft from which he had just emerged—a black well in the darkness. But in front of him a strange grisly radiance glowed about a grim altar built of human skulls. The source of that light he could not determine, but on the altar lay a sullen, night-black object—the Black Stone!

Bran wasted no time in giving thanks that the guardians of the grim relic were nowhere near. He caught up the Stone, and gripping it under his left arm, crawled into the shaft. When a man turns his back on peril, its clammy menace looms

more grisly than when he advances upon it. So Bran, crawling back up the nighted shaft with his grisly prize, felt the darkness turn on him and slink behind him, grinning with dripping fangs. Clammy sweat beaded his flesh and he hastened to the best of his ability, ears strained for some stealthy sound to betray that fell shapes were at his heels. Strong shudders shook him, despite himself, and the short hair on his neck prickled as if a cold wind blew at his back.

When he reached the first of the tiny steps he felt as if he had attained to the outer boundaries of the mortal world. Up them he went, stumbling and slipping, and with a deep gasp of relief, came out into the tomb, whose spectral grayness seemed like the blaze of noon in comparison to the stygian depths he had just traversed. He replaced the central stone and strode into the light of the outer day, and never was the cold yellow light of the sun more grateful, as it dispelled the shadows of black-winged nightmares of fear and madness that seemed to have ridden him up out of the black deeps. He shoved the great blocking stone back into place, and picking up the cloak he had left at the mouth of the tomb, he wrapped it about the Black Stone and hurried away, a strong revulsion and loathing shaking his soul and lending wings to his strides.

A gray silence brooded over the land. It was desolate as the blind side of the moon; yet Bran felt the potentialities of life—under his feet, in the brown earth—sleeping, but how soon to waken, and in what horrific fashion?

He came through the tall, masking reeds to the still deep mere called Dagon's Mere. No slightest ripple ruffled the cold blue water to give evidence of the grisly monster legend said dwelt beneath. Bran closely scanned the breathless landscape. He saw no hint of life, human or unhuman. He sought the instincts of his savage soul to know if any unseen eyes fixed their lethal gaze upon him, and found no response. He was alone as if he were the last man alive on earth.

Swiftly he unwrapped the Black Stone, and as it lay in his hands like a solid, sullen block of darkness, he did not seek to learn the secret of its material nor scan the cryptic characters carved thereon. Weighing it in his hands and calculating the distance, he flung it far out, so that it fell almost exactly in the middle of the lake. A sullen splash and the waters closed over it. There was a moment of shimmering flashes on the bosom of the lake; then the blue surface stretched placid and unrippled again.

## 5

THE were-woman turned swiftly as Bran approached her door. Her slant-eyes widened.

"You! And alive! And sane!"

"I have been into Hell and I have returned," he growled. "What is more, I have that which I sought."

"The Black Stone?" she cried. "You really dared steal it? Where is it?"

"No matter; but last night my stallion screamed in his stall and I heard something crunch beneath his thundering hoofs which was not the wall of the stable—and there was blood on his hoofs when I came to see, and blood on the floor of the stall. And I have heard stealthy sounds in the night, and noises beneath my dirt floor, as if worms burrowed deep in the earth. They know I have stolen their Stone. Have you betrayed me?"

She shook her head.

"I keep your secret; they do not need my word to know you. The farther they have retreated from the world of men, the greater have grown their powers in other uncanny ways. Some dawn your hut will stand empty, and if men dare investigate

they will find nothing—except crumbling bits of earth on the dirt floor."

Bran smiled terribly.

"I have not planned and toiled thus far to fall prey to the talons of vermin. If They strike me down in the night, They will never know what became of their idol—or whatever it be to Them. I would speak with Them."

"Dare you come with me and meet Them in the night?" she asked.

"Thunder of all gods!" he snarled. "Who are you to ask me if I dare? Lead me to Them and let me bargain for a vengeance this night. The hour of retribution draws nigh. This day I saw silvered helmets and bright shields gleam across the fens—the new commander has arrived at the Tower of Trajan and Caius Camillus has marched to the Wall."

THAT night the king went across the dark desolation of the moors with the silent were-woman. The night was thick and still as if the land lay in ancient slumber. The stars blinked vaguely, mere points of red struggling through the unbreathing gloom. Their gleam was dimmer than the glitter in the eyes of the woman who glided beside the king. Strange thoughts shook Bran, vague, titanic primeval. Tonight ancestral linkings with these slumbering fens stirred in his soul and troubled him with the fantasmal, enveiled shapes of monstrous dreams. The vast age of his race was borne upon him; where now he walked an outlaw and an alien, dark-eyed kings in whose mold he was cast had reigned in old times. The Celtic and Roman invaders were as strangers to this ancient isle beside his people. Yet his race likewise had been invaders, and there was an older race than his—a race whose beginnings lay lost and hidden back beyond the dark oblivion of antiquity.

Ahead of them loomed a low range of hills, which formed the easternmost extremity of those straying chains which far away climbed at last to the mountains of Wales. The woman led the way up what might have been a sheep-path, and halted before a wide, black, gaping cave.

"A door to those you seek, O king!" her laughter rang hateful in the gloom. "Dare ye enter?"

His fingers closed in her tangled locks and he shook her viciously.

"Ask me but once more if I dare," he grated, "and your head and shoulders part company! Lead on."

Her laughter was like sweet deadly venom. They passed into the cave and Bran struck flint and steel. The flicker of the tinder showed him a wide, dusty cavern, on the roof of which hung clusters of bats. Lighting a torch, he lifted it and scanned the shadowy recesses, seeing nothing but dust and emptiness.

"Where are They?" he growled.

She beckoned him to the back of the cave and leaned against the rough wall, as if casually. But the king's keen eyes caught the motion of her hand pressing hard against a projecting ledge. He recoiled as a round black well gaped suddenly at his feet. Again her laughter slashed him like a keen silver knife. He held the torch to the opening and again saw small worn steps leading down.

"They do not need those steps," said Atla. "Once they did, before your people drove them into the darkness. But you will need them."

She thrust the torch into a niche above the well; it shed a faint red light into the darkness below. She gestured into the well and Bran loosened his sword and stepped into the shaft. As he went down into the mystery of the darkness, the light was blotted out above him, and he thought for an instant Atla had covered the opening again. Then he realized that she was descending after him.

THE descent was not a long one. Abruptly Bran felt his feet on a solid floor. Atla swung down beside him and stood in the dim circle of light that drifted down the shaft. Bran could not see the limits of the place into which he had come.

"Many caves in these hills," said Atla, her voice sounding small and strangely brittle in the vastness, "are but doors to greater caves which lie beneath, even as a man's words and deeds are but small indications of the dark caverns of murky thought lying behind and beneath."

And now Bran was aware of movement in the gloom. The darkness was filled with stealthy noises not like those made by any human foot. Abruptly sparks began to flash and float in the blackness, like flickering fireflies. Closer they came until they girdled him in a wide half-moon. And beyond the ring gleamed other sparks, a solid sea of them, fading away in the gloom until the farthest were mere tiny pin-points of light. And Bran knew they were the slanted eyes of the beings who had come upon him in such numbers that his brain reeled at the contemplation—and at the vastness of the cavern.

Now that he faced his ancient foes, Bran knew no fear. He felt the waves of terrible menace emanating from them, the grisly hate, the inhuman threat to body, mind and soul. More than a member of a less ancient race, he realized the horror of his position, but he did not fear, though he confronted the ultimate Horror of the dreams and legends of his race. His blood raced fiercely, but it was with the hot excitement of the hazard, not the drive of terror.

"They know you have the Stone, O king," said Atla, and though he knew she feared, though he felt her physical efforts to control her trembling limbs, there was no quiver of fright in her voice. "You are in deadly peril; they know your breed of old—oh, they remember the days when their ancestors were men! I cannot save you; both of us will die as no human has died for ten centuries. Speak to them, if you will; they can understand your speech, though you may not understand theirs. But it will avail not—you are human—and a Pict."

Bran laughed, and the closing ring of fire shrank back at the savagery in his laughter. Drawing his sword with a soul-chilling rasp of steel, he set his back against what he hoped was a solid stone wall. Facing the glittering eyes with his sword gripped in his right hand and his dirk in his left, he laughed as a blood-hungry wolf snarls.

"Aye," he growled, "I am a Pict, a son of those warriors who drove your brutish ancestors before them like chaff before the storm!—who flooded the land with your blood and heaped high your skulls for a sacrifice to the Moon-Woman! You who fled of old before my race, dare ye now snarl at your master? Roll on me like a flood, now, if ye dare! Before your viper fangs drink my life I will reap your multitudes like ripened barley—of your severed heads will I build a tower and of your mangled corpses will I rear up a wall! Dogs of the dark, vermin of Hell, worms of the earth, rush in and try my steel! When Death finds me in this dark cavern, your living will howl for the scores of your dead and your Black Stone will be lost to you for ever—for only I know where it is hidden, and not all the tortures of all the Hells can wring the secret from my lips!"

Then followed a tense silence; Bran faced the fire-lit darkness, tensed like a wolf at bay, waiting the charge; at his side the woman cowered, her eyes ablaze. Then from the silent ring that hovered beyond the dim torchlight rose a vague abhorrent murmur. Bran, prepared as he was for anything, started. Gods, was *that*

the speech of creatures which had once been called men?

Atla straightened, listening intently. From her lips came the same hideous soft sibilances, and Bran, though he had already known the grisly secret of her being, knew that never again could he touch her save with soul-shaken loathing.

She turned to him, a strange smile curving her red lips dimly in the ghostly light.

"They fear you, O king! By the black secrets of R'lyeh, who are you that Hell itself quails before you? Not your steel, but the stark ferocity of your soul has driven unused fear into their strange minds. They will buy back the Black Stone at any price."

"Good." Bran sheathed his weapons. "They shall promise not to molest you because of your aid of me. And," his voice hummed like the purr of a hunting tiger, "They shall deliver into my hands Titus Sulla, governor of Ebbracum, now commanding the Tower of Trajan. This They can do—how, I know not. But I know that in the old days, when my people warred with these Children of the Night, babes disappeared from guarded huts and none saw the stealers come or go. Do They understand?"

Again rose the low frightful sounds, and Bran, who feared not their wrath, shuddered at their voices.

"They understand," said Atla. "Bring the Black Stone to Dagon's Ring tomorrow night when the earth is veiled with the blackness that foreruns the dawn. Lay the Stone on the altar. There They will bring Titus Sulla to you. Trust Them; They have not interfered in human affairs for many centuries, but They will keep their word."

Bran nodded and, turning, climbed up the stair with Atla close behind him. At the top he turned and looked down once more. As far as he could see floated a glittering ocean of slanted yellow eyes upturned. But the owners of those eyes kept carefully beyond the dim circle of torchlight and of their bodies he could see nothing. Their low hissing speech floated up to him, and he shuddered as his imagination visualized, not a throng of biped creatures, but a swarming, swaying myriad of serpents, gazing up at him with their glittering, unwinking eyes.

He swung into the upper cave and Atla thrust the blocking stone back in place. It fitted into the entrance of the well with uncanny precision; Bran was unable to discern any crack in the apparently solid floor of the cavern. Atla made a motion to extinguish the torch, but the king stayed her.

"Keep it so until we are out of the cave," he grunted. "We might tread on an adder in the dark."

Atla's sweetly hateful laughter rose maddeningly in the flickering gloom.

## 6

IT WAS not long before sunset when Bran came again to the reed-grown marge of Dagon's Mere. Casting cloak and sword-belt on the ground, he stripped himself of his short leathern breeches. Then gripping his naked dirk in his teeth, he went into the water with the smooth ease of a diving seal. Swimming strongly, he gained the center of the small lake, and turning, drove himself downward.

The mere was deeper than he had thought. It seemed he would never reach the bottom, and when he did, his groping hands failed to find what he sought. A roaring in his ears warned him, and he swam to the surface.

Gulping deep of the refreshing air, he dived again, and again his quest was fruitless. A third time he sought the depth, and this time his groping hands met a familiar object in the silt of the bottom. Grasping it, he swam up to the surface.

The Stone was not particularly bulky, but it was heavy. He swam leisurely, and suddenly was aware of a curious stir in the waters about him which was not caused by his own exertions. Thrusting his face below the surface, he tried to pierce the blue depths with his eyes and thought to see a dim, gigantic shadow hovering there.

He swam faster, not frightened, but wary. His feet struck the shallows and he waded up on the shelving shore. Looking back he saw the waters swirl and subside. He shook his head, swearing. He had discounted the ancient legend which made Dagon's Mere the lair of a nameless water-monster, but now he had a feeling as if his escape had been narrow. The time-worn myths of the ancient land were taking form and coming to life before his eyes. What primeval shape lurked below the surface of that treacherous mere, Bran could not guess, but he felt that the fenmen had good reason for shunning the spot, after all.

Bran donned his garments, mounted the black stallion and rode across the fens in the desolate crimson of the sunset's afterglow, with the Black Stone wrapped in his cloak. He rode, not to his hut, but to the west, in the direction of the Tower of Trajan and the Ring of Dagon. As he covered the miles that lay between, the red stars winked out. Midnight passed him in the moonless night and still Bran rode on. His heart was hot for his meeting with Titus Sulla. Atla had gloated over the anticipation of watching the Roman writhe under torture, but no such thought was in the Pict's mind. The governor should have his chance with weapons—with Bran's own sword he should face the Pictish king's dirk, and live or die according to his prowess. And though Sulla was famed throughout the provinces as a swordsman, Bran felt no doubt as to the outcome.

Dagon's Ring lay some distance from the Tower—a sullen circle of tall, gaunt stones planted upright, with a rough-hewn stone altar in the center. The Romans looked on these menhirs with aversion; they thought the Druids had reared them; but the Celts supposed Bran's people, the Picts, had planted them—and Bran well knew what hands reared those grim monoliths in lost ages, though for what reasons, he but dimly guessed.

The king did not ride straight to the Ring. He was consumed with curiosity as to how his grim allies intended carrying out their promise. That They could snatch Titus Sulla from the very midst of his men, he felt sure, and he believed he knew how They would do it. He felt the gnawings of a strange misgiving, as if he had tampered with powers of unknown breadth and depth, and had loosed forces which he could not control. Each time he remembered that reptilian murmur, those slanted eyes of the night before, a cold breath passed over him. They had been abhorrent enough when his people drove Them into the caverns under the hills, ages ago; what had long centuries of retrogression made of Them? In their nighted, subterranean life, had They retained any of the attributes of humanity at all?

Some instinct prompted him to ride toward the Tower. He knew he was near; but for the thick darkness he could have plainly seen its stark outline tusking the horizon. Even now he should be able to make it out dimly. An obscure, shuddery premonition shook him, and he spurred the stallion into swift canter.

And suddenly Bran staggered in his saddle as from a physical impact, so stunning was the surprise of what met his gaze. The impregnable Tower of Trajan was no more! Bran's astounded gaze rested on a gigantic pile of ruins—of shattered stone and crumbled granite, from which jutted the jagged and splintered ends of broken beams. At one corner of the tumbled heap one tower rose out of the waste of

crumpled masonry, and it leaned drunkenly as if its foundations had been half cut away.

BRAN dismounted and walked forward, dazed by bewilderment. The moat was filled in places by fallen stones and brown pieces of mortared wall. He crossed over and came among the ruins. Where, he knew, only a few hours before the flags had resounded to the martial tramp of iron-clad feet, and the walls had echoed to the clang of shields and the blast of the loud-throated trumpets, a horrific silence reigned.

Almost under Bran's feet, a broken shape writhed and groaned. The king bent down to the legionary, who lay in a sticky red pool of his own blood. A single glance showed the Pict that the man, horribly crushed and shattered, was dying.

Lifting the bloody head, Bran placed his flask to the pulped lips, and the Roman instinctively drank deep, gulping through splintered teeth. In the dim starlight Bran saw his glazed eyes roll.

"The walls fell," muttered the dying man. "They crashed down like the skies falling on the day of doom. Ah Jove, the skies rained shards of granite and hail-stones of marble!"

"I have felt no earthquake shock," Bran scowled, puzzled.

"It was no earthquake," muttered the Roman. "Before last dawn it began, the faint dim scratching and clawing far below the earth. We of the guard heard it —like rats burrowing, or like worms hollowing out the earth. Titus laughed at us, but all day long we heard it. Then at midnight the Tower quivered and seemed to settle—as if the foundations were being dug away——"

A shudder shook Bran Mak Morn. The worms of the earth! Thousands of vermin digging like moles far below the castle, burrowing away the foundations—gods, the land must be honeycombed with tunnels and caverns — these creatures were even less human than he had thought—what ghastly shapes of darkness had he invoked to his aid?

"What of Titus Sulla?" he asked, again holding the flask to the legionary's lips; in that moment the dying Roman seemed to him almost like a brother.

"Even as the Tower shuddered we heard a fearful scream from the governor's chamber," muttered the soldier. "We rushed there—as we broke down the door we heard his shrieks—they seemed to recede —*into the bowels of the earth!* We rushed in; the chamber was empty. His blood-stained sword lay on the floor; in the stone flags of the floor a black hole gaped. Then —the—towers—reeled—the—roof broke; —through — a — storm — of — crashing —walls—I—crawled."

A strong convulsion shook the broken figure.

"Lay me down," whispered the Roman. "I die."

He had ceased to breathe before Bran could comply. The Pict rose, mechanically cleansing his hands. He hastened from the spot, and as he galloped over the darkened fens, the weight of the accursed Black Stone under his cloak was as the weight of a foul nightmare on a mortal breast.

As he approached the Ring, he saw an eery glow within, so that the gaunt stones stood etched like the ribs of a skeleton in which a witch-fire burns. The stallion snorted and reared as Bran tied him to one of the menhirs. Carrying the Stone he strode into the grisly circle and saw Atla standing beside the altar, one hand on her hip, her sinuous body swaying in a serpentine manner. The altar glowed all over with ghastly light, and Bran knew someone, probably Atla, had rubbed it with phosphorus from some dank swamp or quagmire.

He strode forward and, whipping his

cloak from about the Stone, flung the accursed thing on to the altar.

"I have fulfilled my part of the contract," he growled.

"And They theirs," she retorted. "Look! —They come!"

He wheeled, his hand instinctively dropping to his sword. Outside the Ring the great stallion screamed savagely and reared against his tether. The night wind moaned through the waving grass and an abhorrent soft hissing mingled with it. Between the menhirs flowed a dark tide of shadows, unstable and chaotic. The Ring filled with glittering eyes which hovered beyond the dim, illusive circle of illumination cast by the phosphorescent altar. Somewhere in the darkness a human voice tittered and gibbered idiotically. Bran stiffened, the shadows of a horror clawing at his soul.

He strained his eyes, trying to make out the shapes of those who ringed him. But he glimpsed only billowing masses of shadow which heaved and writhed and squirmed with almost fluid consistency.

"Let them make good their bargain!" he exclaimed angrily.

"Then see, O king!" cried Atla in a voice of piercing mockery.

THERE was a stir, a seething in the writhing shadows, and from the darkness crept, like a four-legged animal, a human shape that fell down and groveled at Bran's feet and writhed and mowed, and lifting a death's-head, howled like a dying dog. In the ghastly light, Bran, soul-shaken, saw the blank glassy eyes, the bloodless features, the loose, writhing, froth-covered lips of sheer lunacy—gods, was this Titus Sulla, the proud lord of life and death in Ebbracum's proud city?

Bran bared his sword.

"I had thought to give this stroke in vengeance," he said somberly. "I give it in mercy—*Vale Caesar!*"

The steel flashed in the eery light and Sulla's head rolled to the foot of the glowing altar, where it lay staring up at the shadowed sky.

"They harmed him not!" Atla's hateful laugh slashed the sick silence. "It was what he saw and came to know that broke his brain! Like all his heavy-footed race, he knew nothing of the secrets of this ancient land. This night he has been dragged through the deepest pits of Hell, where even you might have blenched!"

"Well for the Romans that they know not the secrets of this accursed land!" Bran roared, maddened, "with its monster-haunted meres, its foul witch-women, and its lost caverns and subterranean realms where spawn in the darkness shapes of Hell!"

"Are they more foul than a mortal who seeks their aid?" cried Atla with a shriek of fearful mirth. "Give them their Black Stone!"

A cataclysmic loathing shook Bran's soul with red fury.

"Aye, take your cursed Stone!" he roared, snatching it from the altar and dashing it among the shadows with such savagery that bones snapped under its impact. A hurried babble of grisly tongues rose and the shadows heaved in turmoil. One segment of the mass detached itself for an instant, and Bran cried out in fierce revulsion, though he caught only a fleeting glimpse of the thing, had only a brief impression of a broad, strangely flattened head, pendulous writhing lips that bared curved, pointed fangs, and a hideously misshapen, dwarfish body that seemed *mottled* —all set off by those unwinking reptilian eyes. Gods!—the myths had prepared him for horror in human aspect, horror induced by bestial visage and stunted deformity—but this was the horror of nightmare and the night.

"Go back to Hell and take your idol with you!" he yelled, brandishing his clenched fists to the skies, as the thick shadows re-

ceded, flowing back and away from him like the foul waters of some black flood. "Your ancestors were men, though strange and monstrous—but gods, ye have become in ghastly fact what my people called ye in scorn!

"Worms of the earth, back into your holes and burrows! Ye foul the air and leave on the clean earth the slime of the serpents ye have become! Gonar was right —there are shapes too foul to use even against Rome!"

He sprang from the Ring as a man flees the touch of a coiling snake, and tore the stallion free. At his elbow Atla was shrieking with fearful laughter, all human attributes dropped from her like a cloak in the night.

"King of Pictland!" she cried. "King of fools! Do you blench at so small a thing? Stay and let me show you real fruits of the pits! Ha! ha! ha! Run, fool, run! But you are stained with the taint—you have called them forth and they will remember! And in their own time they will come to you again!"

He yelled a wordless curse and struck her savagely in the mouth with his open hand. She staggered, blood starting from her lips, but her fiendish laughter only rose higher.

Bran leaped into the saddle, wild for the clean heather and the cold blue hills of the north where he could plunge his sword into clean slaughter and his sickened soul into the red maelstrom of battle, and forget the horror which lurked below the fens of the west. He gave the frantic stallion the rein, and rode through the night like a hunted ghost, until the hellish laughter of the howling were-woman died out in the darkness behind.

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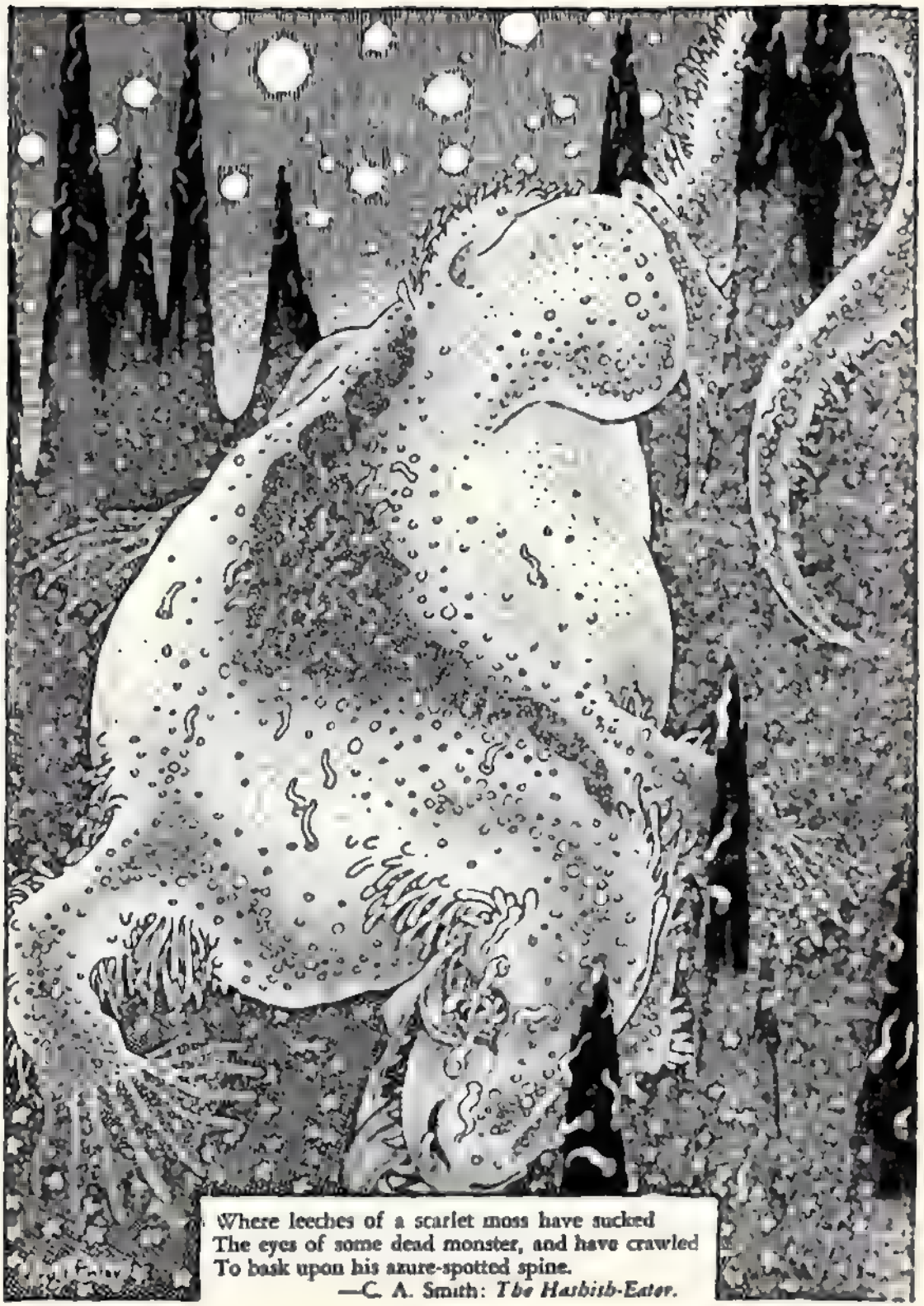
# The Dream

By EDITH HURLEY

Out of the misty shadows came the dream,
If dream it were and not dread things to be.
Upon the shore of some vast midnight sea
I walked, and there was not a single gleam
Of moon or stars the darkness to redeem,
But eery Fear alone kept pace with me
As Earth went hurtling through Eternity,
And on the planet Silence reigned supreme.

A dim remembrance lingered with me still,
Of shattered stars that made the darkness bright,
The great sun shrinking like a pricked balloon;
Of frantic feet that climbed a lonely hill;
Of water rising, and the fall of night;
And I awoke and saw the trembling moon.



Where leeches of a scarlet moss have sucked
The eyes of some dead monster, and have crawled
To bask upon his azure-spotted spine.
—C. A. Smith: *The Hashish-Eater.*

# THE EYRIE

READERS, here is news of two exceptionally fine serials that will appear soon in WEIRD TALES. One of them, *The Twilight of the Gods,* by Edmond Hamilton, deals with the Norse gods as real persons instead of deities. It is different from anything you have ever read before, and will hold your breathless interest to the last fascinating episode. The other serial, *A Million Years in the Future,* is by Thomas P. Kelley, author of *The Last Pharaoh* and *I Found Cleopatra.* It is undoubtedly the most exciting interplanetary story ever published. Weird to its very core, it deals with the Nine Terrible Sisters, and the ravening Wolves of Worra, and paints an unforgettable picture of the great god Time as he sits spellbound in his black tower on the Moon of Madness.

### A New Writing Technique

Miss Leah Drake writes from Owensboro, Kentucky: "The August WT was remarkable for two features which your writers have been working toward for some time: character-study, and a superlative style of writing. I'll take my stand (in Dixie and anywhere else) that for distinguished writing, WT authors can give cards and spades to any of their brotherhood in the 'slicks'. Take *Spawn,* for example: here is a completely new style of writing. Reminiscent of Charles Fort's, the peculiarly gripping style of this story was something new in the work of putting words together—not an easy feat! Mr. Miller has read his Bible to considerable advantage, for certain sentences, and groupings of words, are Old Testament if I ever read it (which I certainly have!) Then take *Apprentice Magician,* which was humorous in style, and yet none the less weird and thrilling for that. A comic ghost-story is usually very dull, and certainly not thrilling—yet this story was a true weird tale and the dry drollery of its 'Li'l Abner' hero did not detract from its grotesquery. Mr. Price in some strange way managed to blend two usually irreconcilable elements. Let's hear more about that cute li'l ol' country boy! *Giants in the Sky* reveals yet a third new idea in WT stories: the entirely logical notion that all unearthly and alien beings are *not* evil and hostile to man. Long's creatures were outré and unhuman, but in them, as in those of our own race, were the elements of pity and tenderness, and a not-unkind curiosity resembling that of our own scientists. The story was touching, poignant—and so sane! For certainly the denizens of other spheres have the same emotions as we do, seeing that one Creator designed us all! Perhaps the best example of the first two elements of writing that I mentioned—character-study and distinguished style—is the story *The Valley Was Still.* That was a perfect piece of writing! There was not only the necessary weird element in it—there was an ideal portrait of a Southern soldier; there was the eternal conflict between honor and—the easiest way. And honor won. It was a story that I would place among the great short stories of the world. It had more than a pure style (all Wellman's stories have that)—it had beauty. . . . For these new features of WT stories—for the issues that get better and better each month—let us all give a hur-

rah, banzai, and viva, while making a deep salaam!"

### Quinn Leads

Bart Reagan writes from Pittsburgh: "The August issue is o. k. . . . Quinn's incomparable Jules de Grandin leads in *The House of the Three Corpses.* But that is no surprise. Second honors go to Miller for his *Spawn.* It rings true in theme and craftsmanship. Wellman easily takes third honors with his *The Valley Was Still.* He handles this theme very well. Price's yarn tickled me. Good humor in every paragraph. A tale like this now and then improves WT. . . . But Poe reprints are out. How about HPL reprints for new readers (and old ones too)? Reprints could be serialized. The cover of this issue is fine."

### Different Stuff

Robert Bloch writes from Milwaukee: "Speaking of different stuff, *Spawn* was just that. And—*Apprentice Magician.* A damned, devilish, demoniac, dark, dour, dank, dismal, dim, diabolical tale filled with fine human touches. One of the smoothest ever rendered by pearl-white-Price, Dervish of Djinns. More from Price, Wandrei, Long and other old-timers—keeps the young squirts on their toes."

### May WT Live Forever

Dorothy Ellis writes from San Francisco: "I have never been a subscriber to WEIRD TALES. But for years I have snatched a copy from the nearest newsstand and borne it triumphantly home to wallow—and I mean just that—in the sheer fascination of horror. Nor have I ever been disappointed. The reprint some months ago of *The Curse of Yig* affected me with almost tearful nostalgia (I was living in a rattlesnake country when I first read it in your magazine.) And the names of the contributors haunt me as I fumble with my own inadequate mss. But the main point of this is merely cheery, if shivery, congratulations. Individual stories may not have been to my particular taste, but I have never been let down by any issue. And in my basement reposes a box with many, many old copies of WEIRD TALES which I would no more touch than I would shake hands with a copperhead. . . . Drink with me as I raise a cup of the Lord knows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what unearthly witch's brew and say (with due regard for an extremely clever and consistent editorial policy): WEIRD TALES, live forever!"

### Sarcasm?

Anthony F. Ranere writes from Hammonton, New Jersey: "I'm sorry *Almuric* is finished. I've enjoyed every word of that splendid story. Mr. Howard succeeded in making one of the finest stories I've ever read. . . . *Spawn* was good! And that Edgar Allan Poe is a comer: before you know it he's liable to be called the 'father of the short story'. Anyway he finally made WEIRD TALES, which in itself is no small honor. Yep, I'd say Poe is going places. I've got to keep an eye on him. I feel kinda like I discovered him. Well, time will tell, and if he gets famous, don't forget—I told you so! Well, anyhoo, best wishes for the future success of your very good rag."

### The Best Verse

Richard H. Hart writes from New Orleans: "The August issue is altogether excellent. Miller's story, *Spawn,* is easily the most blood-curdling; he must have pushed the 'weird' key on his typewriter and left it on all the way through. For sheer imaginative power, I think *Giants in the Sky* equals anything published in a long time. *The Valley Was Still* is a fine piece of re-creation—and excellent recreation, as well; Mr. Wellman should go places. I enjoyed Price's whimsical yarn very much. Too bad more writers can't combine weirdness and humor with such satisfying results. Quinn turns out his usual craftsmanlike story, although not as weird as is his wont. After *Washington Nocturne,* however, he must expect his work to seem a trifle pale for a few issues; he put plenty of the real heart's-blood into that one. I can't help feeling sorry for the readers who didn't appreciate it. The verse, as usual, is excellent. I think you are publishing the best verse in the country, regardless of classification. I'd like to see you get out an anthology, if you could find it worth while; Starrett's and Field's pieces in this number would be well worth inclusion."

### We Shall Reprint This Story

Richard Kraft writes from Long Branch, New Jersey: "Though I have already written

my monthly letter to WEIRD TALES, I feel I must write again. You see, I have managed to purchase a whole pile of old WEIRDS—and in the April, 1933, issue I have just finished *Revelations in Black,* by Carl Jacobi. What a story! I find it hard to think up suitable adjectives to praise it. Lots of vampire yarns have I read: some good, some bad, some lousy; but this absolutely is the best. Every situation in this tale was steeped in cold horror. Seldom does a yarn actually make me jump; I pride myself on being a veteran WEIRD TALES reader, but *Revelations in Black* had me gasping. Jacobi is a damn good author. What has happened to him lately? I can't help thinking that *Revelations in Black* is just about the best thing I have ever read in WT. To my mind it even tops the terror-filled works of H. P. L. A question, please. Of all the stories ever published in our mag, which one was absolutely the most popular? I'm willing to venture that *Revelations* isn't far from the lead!" [The most popular story ever printed in WT was *The Woman of the Wood,* by A. Merritt. Others at the top were *The Outsider,* by H. P. Lovecraft, *When the Green Star Waned,* by Nictzin Dyahlis, and *Shamblean,* by C. L. Moore.—THE EDITOR.]

### From a New Reader

Lee Schirck writes from Oklahoma City: "I am a comparatively new reader of your really grand magazine. (Also permanent.) All my friends know that I love WEIRD TALES too. *Spawn* and *Giants in the Sky* were your best August stories. I'll never forget these ooooooogy stories—*The Rats in the Walls, Up Under the Roof, The Return of Hastur,* and *The White Rat.* I could applaud for hours—but why? Just keep it up 'cause—I love WEIRD TALES."

### Consistently High Standard

Wilson Lane writes from Wooster, Ohio: "For several years I have enjoyed reading WEIRD TALES, and have found the magazine to be of a consistently high and improving literary and artistic standard. I have especially liked the stories by Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith, and the excellent art work of Virgil Finlay. Allow me to congratulate you

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on the quality of the magazine, and to hope that you will continue with the same type of work that has been produced in the past."

### From Merrie England

J. E. Peatfield writes from Manchester, England: "All the way from 'Merrie England' to give you my thanks for many, many unforgettable, enjoyable reading hours. I have read WEIRD TALES for the past six years. . . . I like all your types of stories. I demand from life as much variety as possible. We have nothing at all in England anything like this."

### Spawn

Henry Kuttner writes from Beverly Hills, California: "I am amazed, charmed and delighted. Not in a long while have I enjoyed any story as much as P. Schuyler Miller's *Spawn*. That's truly a veritable honey of a yarn—one of the best I've read in a long, long time. The peculiar style is strikingly effective, and I anticipate re-reading the tale more than once, something I seldom do. Congrats on your acumen in buying the epos. Congrats, too, to Finlay on his fine weird cover, and a courtly bow to Messire Ferman on his strong, macabre technique. Second place in the issue, after *Spawn*, should be divided between *Almuric* and *Apprentice Magician*, in my opinion."

### Imagination, Beauty, Strangeness

John W. Parsons writes from Pasadena: "I note that an annual crop of your readers manage to assume the prerogative of deity, and ergo 'this is best' or 'that is no good', period. I wish I could exercise such judgment of universal merit. For myself I prefer stories in which imagination and a quality of beauty and strangeness are blended with a certain literary quality. In this connection I particularly recall *The Planet of the Dead* and *The Necromantic Tale* by Clark Ashton Smith; *The Dark God's Kiss* by C. L. Moore; *Celephais* by H. P. Lovecraft; and *Toean Matjan* by Vannette Herron. May there be more stories of this magnitude."

### Almuric

Gerard Lerner writes from Youngstown, Ohio: "I have just finished reading the

August WEIRD TALES, and must congratulate you on another superb issue. WT seems to improve more each month. How do you do it? Of course I was glad to see the old type back; makes a much neater-looking page. I first became acquainted with WT with the September 1937 issue, and have not missed a copy since that time. All my copies are bound and repose in a special section of my library. Your covers by Finlay are always good, and I remember one, the December 1937 cover, as the most beautiful I ever saw on any magazine. Now for the stories in the August issue. First, of course, is the concluding installment of Howard's *Almuric*. This story, in my opinion, is one of the greatest ever to appear in WT. Howard had the knack of vivid description and thrilling action that few authors can lay claim to. I really lived that yarn. What a tragedy the magic pen is still, to write no more. *The House of the Three Corpses*—another gem by Quinn. *Return from Death* by Bryan—a real chiller. It fairly made my blood run cold to think of that man in the refrigerator. I can still remember vividly Bryan's thrilling tale, *The Ho-Ho-Kam Terror,* the first story I ever read in WEIRD TALES."

### The August Issue

Charles H. Chandler writes from Wooster, Ohio: "Concerning the August issue of WEIRD TALES, congratulations on maintaining the high standards set in the last issue. First place among the stories goes to the Poe reprint, but if that doesn't count, call it a tie between *Apprentice Magician* and *The Little Man.* First of these was very refreshing; both well done. *Almuric* ends well. When will authors, F. B. Long in particular, get rid of the idea of creatures of totally alien races falling in love with each other? It's laughable. . . . Wellman's story, *The Valley Was Still,* deserves honorable mention."

### Concise Comments

E. Hoffmann Price writes from California: "P. Schuyler Miller's yarn, *Spawn,* is indeed amazing; his slightly eccentric style and arrangement perfectly suited to that story. I

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hope that many join me in complimenting him, and you, for your respective responsibilities in getting it into print."

John Kelsch writes from Brooklyn: "I am a regular WT fan who considers Quinn your best writer, Finlay your best artist, and who does not like your Elder God, science-fiction, or vampire stories. All others satisfy me deeply."

Frank Roberts writes from London, England: "Your July issue is splendid. I am not a lover of science-fiction, but the s-f tales you get hold of are in a class of their own. Congratulations to you for your editorial policy and your continued high standard of literature."

David R. Evans writes from Victoria, Australia: "My favorite authors in WEIRD TALES are Seabury Quinn, Robert Bloch, and Henry Kuttner—good old regulars. Hypnotism has been my favorite subject for a long time until I read a reprint in WEIRD TALES entitled *Medusa*, by Royal W. Jimerson, which brought atavism to my notice."

Bob Pehrson writes from Manitowoc, Wisconsin: "On reading for the first time your fine publication, I find I enjoyed *The Little Man* by Clifford Ball the most, though all your stories were what we 'chilluns' go for."

E. B. Hardy writes from Lewiston, Maine: "Here is my vote for favorite stories in the August WEIRD TALES: 1. *Almuric;* 2. *Apprentice Magician.*"

### That Poe Cover

J. J. O'Connell writes from New York: "I just bought the September WT, and am greatly pleased with the excellent way in which Virgil Finlay has carried out my suggestion of a cover based on Poe's classic poem, *The Raven.* I had pictured in my own mind the Raven perched demurely on the bust of Pallas Athene, but this spread-winged creature from the night's Plutonian shore gives a touch of wildness and terror to the picture that makes it positively macabre. And the wild, distrait countenance of the poet is incomparably well-done. Here's to Virgil Finlay, a real artist if there ever was one. More power to his arm! May I express the hope that this is only the first of a series of

covers illustrating famous weird poems? For, fine as Finlay's black and white illustrations are, his color is even finer. I suggest the three witches from *Macbeth* might make a good cover. . . . His recent full-page picturization of Shakespeare's line, 'I can call spirits from the vasty deep,' would have made a wonderful cover. I am very much gratified to note that H. P. Lovecraft's collected works are to appear at last. The many thousands of Lovecraft admirers who have read his masterly stories in WEIRD TALES will welcome the opportunity to own the volume. Now a word about some of your recent stories. First, *Almuric,* by the late Robert E. Howard. Although ordinarily I am not fond of reading so-called interplanetary stories, Howard quite carried me away with the powerful sweep of his fertile imagination. He produced a story that I cannot easily forget. I fairly lived through the weird adventures of Esau Ironhand myself. Then there was that fine story by Manly Wade Wellman, *The Valley Was Still.* We have come to expect fine literary craftmanship from Wellman's pen, but this strange and eery story has distinction beyond any of his previous stories. P. Schuyer Miller's *Spawn,* in the August issue, is one of the greatest stories I ever read, absolutely unique."

### Most Popular Story

It will help us to keep the magazine as you desire it if you will send in your comments. What stories do you like best, and why? And if there are any stories that you dislike, we want to know about those too. Address your letters to The Eyrie, WEIRD TALES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City. Your favorite story in the August issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was *Spawn,* P. Schuyler Miller's highly imaginative tale for which he invented a new writing technique. That was one powerful story, for a fact.

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# COMING NEXT MONTH

SIMEON GERARD leaned forward in the great leather chair. His white, withered face showed no trace of expression as he said, "I am to die in a month, then?" Doctor Stone hesitated. He felt ill at ease in this great, high-ceilinged room, dimly lit by the red glow of a dying fire. The pungent smoke that curled up from swinging censers tickled his throat. And this strange, shrunken man before him only added to the physician's discomfort. Though Stone had attended Gerard for years, he had always felt a vague, indefinable dislike for the old eccentric. He could not have told exactly why.

Simeon Gerard held up a claw of a hand and looked through its translucent parchment. "A month, you say?" he repeated.

"Roughly, I should say so," Doctor Stone said, more loudly than he had intended. His round, well-shaved face glistened in the reddish glow. "You may live much longer—you may die tonight. Frankly, Gerard, I warned you this was coming."

For a moment the old man's pale blue eyes turned to the doctor. A mocking smile seemed to dance in their depths.

Stone went on stolidly, "This hobby of yours—from a moral standpoint, I have nothing to say. It's none of my business. But it has undermined your health. If you wanted to play with occultism——"

"What?" Gerard's tufted eyebrows lifted.

"Well—devil-worship, then! Praying to Satan and holding Black Masses, or whatever it is—that was your affair. But I know quite well that you've been taking some poisonous drug, against my orders, and doing God knows what else."

"I have made—experiments," Gerard admitted.

The physician shrugged. "There's nothing more to be said. I advise you to get your affairs in order. I'll come whenever you need me. Perhaps I had better leave these. . . ." He laid a small bottle upon a table, and hesitated slightly before resuming. "There will be pain, I'm afraid. Great pain."

Gerard stood up. A spasm crossed his wrinkled face, but he repressed it immediately. Standing straight and still by the fire, he murmured, "I shall not need you again, Stone. Take your opiate with you. I shall not require it, or you. Send your bill to me, or to my heir. Good evening." . . .

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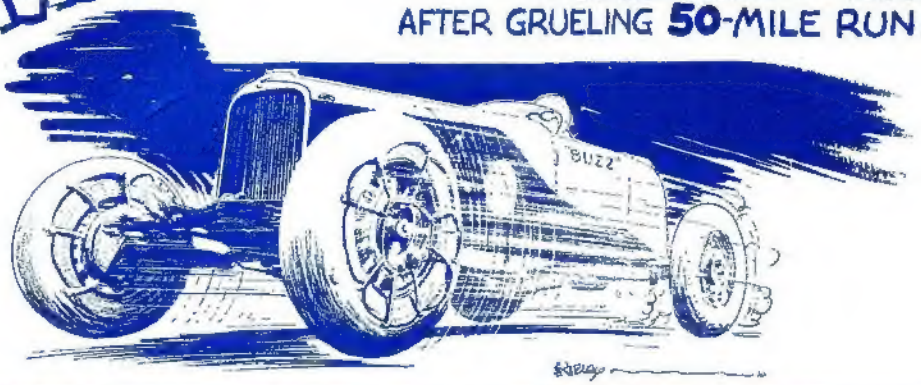


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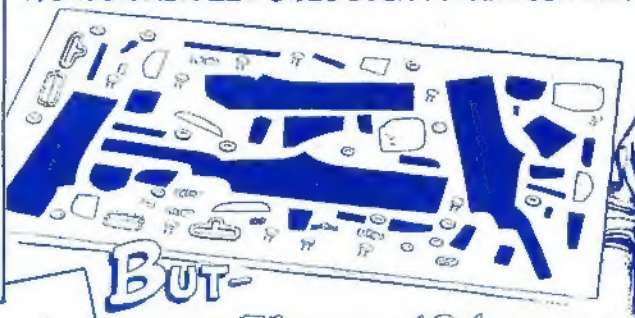

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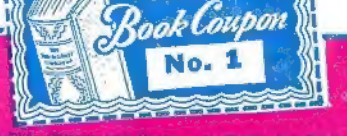


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